

Harry Potter and the Gift of Memories

by The Engulfing Silence

Eidetic Memory, the ability to remember everything you have ever done, seen, smelled, tasted, and touched. To some it is a gift, to others a curse. For Harry Potter, it's both.

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Table of Contents

[Table of Contents](#)

- [1. Memories of a Time Since Past](#)
- [2. The Letter](#)
- [3. Small Time Crises](#)
- [4. The Founding Five](#)
- [5. A Shopping Trip to Remember](#)
- [6. Familiar Familiars and Getting Fitted](#)
- [7. Tonks & Tonks](#)
- [8. The Hardest Part is Saying Goodbye](#)
- [9. The Hogwarts Express](#)
- [10. The Sorting Hat Sings](#)
- [11. Animagus Animagi](#)
- [12. Potions, Snakes, and a Grudge](#)
- [13. A Few Small Bumps](#)
- [14. Flying](#)
- [15. Quidditch Try-Outs](#)
- [16. Halloween Nightmare](#)
- [17. Confusion](#)
- [18. Three Heads are Better than One](#)

[19. In Flight Crises](#)

[20. Help](#)

[21. A Heartfelt Homecoming](#)

[22. Holiday Shopping](#)

[23. Christmas](#)

[24. New Year Gala](#)

[25. Jaguars, Griffins, and Dragons, oh my!](#)

[26. Prank and Punishment](#)

[27. Detention, Into the Forbidden Forest](#)

[28. Down the Trap Door](#)

[29. The Philosopher's Stone](#)

[30. Special Announcement](#)

Memories of a Time Since Past

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter, it belongs to J.K. Rowling.

Currently rated T, but will change to M as time goes on for graphic violence and adult situations.

Chapter 1: Memories of a Time Since Past

"Hello my little Harry," a woman with fiery red hair and beautiful green eyes smiled at me. I knew her face. I saw it whenever the world was not dark. "How's my little man?"

I didn't really know what she was saying, not everything, but the feelings of warmth I felt when she was near made everything else not matter. I would giggle when she would make funny faces or play with my hands and tickle my feet. Every time I saw her, I was happy.

"Mum! Mum!" I giggled and laughed. So did the woman. She liked it when I called her mum.

As she continued to play with me, I saw something around her neck, dangling and swaying as she moved. It was round, and big, and shiny.

I wanted it.

As if responding to my want I felt something well up inside of me. I didn't know what it was, but I had felt this way a few times before. I knew what was going to happen.

The pendant lifted itself around the woman's neck and made its way to me. I held out my hands and grabbed a hold of the shiny round thing, smiling as I began to chew on it.

The woman gave a surprised gasp, but I wasn't really paying attention anymore. "James! James you have to come here and see this!"

A little ways over from us the door that led to the room opened and in

walked a man with messy raven hair and brown mischievous eyes hidden behind a pair of wire frame glasses. "See what Lils? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong, but our little Harry just had his first bout of accidental magic," Lils said excitedly.

"What?"

James walked over to the two of us and looked at me. Blinking as I saw this new person that I knew in front of me, I stopped gnawing on the shiny thing long enough to look up at the man, before going right to back to my previous activity.

"You sure he did accidental magic Lils? I mean, magic at his age is completely unheard of. He's not even one yet."

"I know what I saw," Lils said firmly. "Watch this."

She gently pried the pendant out of my grip. Seeing my new toy gone, I reached out with my hands to get it back, but Lils moved it out of my reach.

For a moment, I thought about crying. That usually got me what I wanted. But Lils who liked it when I called mum and James who liked being called da didn't like it when I cried. They always got very sad. I didn't like it when they were sad, so I didn't cry.

I still wanted the shiny though, so I held out my hands again and reached out for that warm feeling that let me to lift the pendant again. The pendant, once again slipped from around Lils' neck and floated into my hands.

James blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, then blinked again. Finally, he said, "um...Lily, I don't think that was accidental. It seemed pretty deliberate to me."

Lily scoffed, "now who's sounding far-fetched. A one year old using wandless magic? Really James?"

James rubbed the back of his head, "well maybe this is natural for him. After all, the prophecy said he would defeat the Dark Lord. Maybe he's just super powerful." As if someone flipped a switch James began to gush and wiped crocodile tears from his eyes, "I'm so...proud...my son is going to be more powerful than Merlin! Just wait until I show him the ropes and get him all ready to go to Hogwarts!"

"James Potter! I will not have you teach my child to be a Delinquent like you and your Marauder friends!" Lily said in a scolding tone.

James was instantly cowed, "yes, dear."

The scene began to change, Lily and James disappeared and I was alone.

Shouting reached my ears.

"Lily, take Harry and go! It's him! Go! Run! I'll hold him off!"

"Fool, you think you can defeat me without your wand? Avada Kadavera!"

The door burst open and Lily rushed in. Seeing the woman, I smiled and got to my feet.

"Mum!" I held out my hands. "We play now?"

But my mum did not play with me. Instead of coming over to pick me up like she usually did, she began pushing large objects in front of the door. I watched, curious. What was she doing? Was this a new game?

Only after she had put every big object in the room in front of the door did she walk over to me. I smiled and held out my hands. "Mum! Mum!" She smiled at me and gently rubbed my head. "We play now?"

"I'm sorry, Harry," even though mum was smiling, I saw that she was crying.

"You sad? Got boo boo?"

Mum sniffed a bit, her head shaking back and forth. What was going on? Why was mum crying?

Only a few seconds after mum came in did the door burst open, exploding and sending all of the objects that had been previously used as a barricade away. In walked a very tall man with very pale skin, dark hair and dark eyes. I didn't know him. He wasn't unca padfoo, moon or wormy. Who was he?

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!" Lily pleaded as she turned around to face this man.

The man merely laughed and stalked forward. "Stand aside, you silly girl...stand aside, now..." he hissed. His voice sounded kind of like this one snake that I spoke to that lived in our flowers. Except that snake sounded nice. This man did not sound nice. He sounded cold.

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead!" she begged.

"I won't tell you again, stand aside!" the snake-man ordered.

"Not Harry, please...have mercy...have mercy..." she was sobbing by now. I didn't know what was going on. I didn't understand. Why was mum crying? Why did this man want her to move? Did he want something from me?

"Stand aside!" the man all but roared at Lily.

Something seemed to change in the woman once she realized that the snake creature would not be swayed. Lily turned, putting him back in his crib despite his gurgled protest. When he looked into her eyes he saw something different, they had been afraid before but now they were smoldering. She turned back around and glared defiantly at the Snake-man, "no."

"Foolish girl," the man pointed the odd stick that mum, dad and the others used to do their magic. "Avada Kadavera!"

A flash of green light hit mum. I watched as she fell to the floor and went still.

"Mum! Mum!" I called out to her, but she did not answer. She just continued to lay there, not moving.

"Mum! Mum! Mum!" I felt scared. Mum wasn't saying anything. She wasn't getting up. She wasn't moving at all. What was wrong with her? Why wasn't she moving?

The man walked over to me. I looked up at him and felt both scared and angry. Mum wasn't moving because of this man. That green light he created caused mum to stop moving!

"You hurt mum!"

"Yes," the man laughed, amused. "I hurt mum. And now, I am going to hurt you to!" The man raised his stick at me. "Avada Kedavra!"

The green light shot from his stick and hit me. It hurt. It hurt a lot. And I cried. I cried for mum, and dad, and unca padfoo to make the hurting stop.

No one came. All I could hear was the man laughing at me, then a shriek of outrage followed by a cry and then nothing. My world turned dark.

XoX

Brilliant green eyes snapped open and found themselves staring at the white ceiling they had grown up seeing for the past ten years of his life. The room was dim, the only light source being the small trickle of sunlight that streamed in through the blinds and let him know the sun was beginning to rise. Seeing how the day was starting and he would be unlikely to be getting back to sleep anyways, Harry James Potter sat up in his bed with a heavy sigh, his hands going up to massage his forehead.

It was that dream again, one of the many that haunted his sleep. This was nothing new to Harry, while his meditation allowed him to clear his mind and lock his memories away during the day so they wouldn't bother him, there was nothing stopping them from coming out during the night when he fell asleep. It was an unfortunate side effect of sleeping, all mental functions, including any defense he crafted within his mind shut

down while sleeping.

Memories. Those were what he saw every night when he shut his eyes and allowed the sand man to claim him. Unlike most people whose dreams were often inconsequential, unusual, sometimes downright silly, and rarely remembered with any clarity, Harry Potter always remembered his dreams, they were of things he could never, would never, forget.

The reason for this was as simple as it was complex, Harry had what was known as Eidetic Memory, that is, he had the ability to perfectly recall anything he had ever seen or done with the same clarity of vision as if the event being remembered happened just a few seconds ago. Every sight, sound, scent, touch, and taste that he had ever had the pleasure or displeasure of experiencing was locked away within his mind never to be forgotten. It was as much of a blessing as it was a curse.

Turning his head and opening his eyes, he looked around the room that had been his since he was six. It was small, the smallest room at the Dursley's household on number four, Privet Drive in Surrey. Originally it had belonged to his cousin, Dudley, and was used by him to store all of his toys and junk that he never used or had broken but didn't want to throw away. It was only after Harry had, come into his own so to speak, that he had ended up getting the room for himself. Dudley hadn't been happy about that, neither had his parents for that matter, but there really hadn't been much they could do about it either way.

Despite it's small size, it was not lacking in quality materials. His bed while small, was made from a rich rosewood and had a dark, forest green bed spread. Next to the door was an armoire, and over to his left, right under the window, was a desk and chair, all of which were made from the same rich rosewood as his bed. These amenities had taken quite a bit of his hard earned savings from the various jobs he did over the summer to buy, but he considered them worth while investments, especially when taking into account what he had been forced to use before.

Deciding that it was time to get up and start his morning routine, Harry slid out of bed, his bare feet hitting the soft carpet. His left hand came up and waved over at the armoire, while he walked over to the desk. As Harry slid open one of the drawers, the armoire rattled for a moment,

before the doors opened up on their own accord. Likewise, the two drawers on the bottom of the piece of furniture slid open as well.

Harry's hand reached into the desk and pulled the sports watch he had bought for himself a few weeks back. He didn't put it on just yet, instead setting it down on the desk and turning a moment after the armoire opened, seemingly of its own accord.

Several articles of clothing came out from within the standing closet, a pair of black running shorts, a white sleeveless shirt, socks, briefs, and a pair of black running shoes. They floated over to Harry, who grabbed them one-by-one and put them on. Only after the last article of clothing had been placed on his person did he grab the watch and attach it to his wrist.

He looked down at his watch, checking the time. It was four o'clock in the morning, meaning it was unlikely that anyone else in the household was even awake at the moment. That was good, it meant Harry wouldn't be disturbed when he came back from his morning exercise. With those thoughts in mind, Harry made his way outside.

The air outside was crisp, cool, and refreshing. The perfect atmosphere to work up a good sweat, Harry decided as he locked the door and began going through his morning stretches, bending over and touching his toes, twisting his torso from side to side, stretching his arms behind his back and over his head. He was a bit stiff this morning, no doubt this came from the particular memory that had chosen to haunt his dreams last night. It took a bit longer to limber up because of that, but that was alright, he had woken up a little earlier than usual anyways.

As soon as he finished his stretches, Harry hit a button on his watch to start the timer and began his run. Harry made his way to the park, varying his speed from a light jog, to a full out sprint, going from a straight line, to zigzag patterns. He always liked to mix up his work out routine, sometimes just jogging, other times sprinting, and sometimes doing intervals like he was now. It helped keep his body from getting used to his workouts. When Harry got to the park he began the next part of his routine, push ups, sit ups, pull ups, squats, and suicides. By the time he had finished his body had the pleasant ache of someone who had

worked their muscles arduously.

This was something Harry did almost every morning. Five days a week he would wake up in the morning and worked his body through exercises. Sometimes he would push himself to the brink, doing everything he could to break past his physical boundaries, other times, like today, he would only do what he considered a light warm up. He couldn't afford to let his body turn into a swollen bruise due to his plans today. After finishing his work out, Harry headed back home at a light jog.

Physically, not much had changed in the Dursleys household. The living room was almost identical to the night when Harry had been dropped on the Dursley's doorstep. Only the photographs on the mantelpiece really showed how much time had passed. Ten years ago, there had been lots of pictures of what looked like a large pink beach ball wearing different-colored bonnets – but Dudley Dursley was no longer a baby, and now the photographs showed a large blond pig-faced boy riding his first bicycle, on a carousel at the fair, playing a computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother. Like all things except Harry's bedroom, this room showed no sign of him even living there.

That was fine with him, he had never truly considered the Dursley's to be family in any case. There was more to family than just relation by blood.

Harry soon entered the bathroom, disrobing from his now sweat covered clothes. He turned on the shower and soon stepped in. Rather than start cleaning himself right away, Harry pressed his palms against the wall and let the water hit his back. It was cold, starting out at least, but soon warmed up to the point where the room began to get covered in steam. After about a minute or two of simply letting the now hot water run down his form, Harry grabbed a bar of soap and began cleaning himself off. With his free hand, he gestured towards a bottle of shampoo, which lifted off the lip of the tub and floated towards him, stopping only after it had moved above his head. The small lid opened up and began to pour a dollop sized drop on his head, before settling back down in it's original spot. After he was done cleaning his body, the raven haired youth quickly worked the shampoo in his hair into a fine lather before rinsing it off. Soon after he finished cleaning, Harry turned off the water, stepped out, grabbed a towel, and began drying off. It was while he was doing this that

he caught his figure in the fogged up mirror.

At nearly eleven years of age, Harry Potter was slightly above average in height. His body was very lean, and likely always would be, but where most children his age were just skinny, Harry's form was possessing of hard, whip corded muscles. Everywhere he looked he could see the outlines of his muscles, including the beginnings of a six pack. It wasn't as defined as some of the more athletic boys that had started puberty, but it was well above that of any child his age should possess.

Harry knew the reasons why, of course. Or at least, he had a theory on why he had more muscles than a child his age should be capable of getting. But without any true knowledge on the subject, he didn't dare put his theory to the test.

Aside from his rather impressive physic, for a ten going on eleven year old anyways, Harry had several scars that were on his back and chest. Most were nothing serious, his uncle had rarely done anything that could cause physical evidence of the damage he use to do, but there were a few on his back that he got from lashings with his uncle's belt. Of course, there was also the prominent scar on his forehead shaped in a lightning bolt, the scar he got when his parents died.

He shrugged thoughts of his scars (Battle wounds, Harry often joked) off a second later and got into his room and changed into a set of snug black jeans, a green shirt that matched his eyes, and a pair of converse shoes.

He spent the next half an hour sitting down on his floor, in a cross legged position, with his eyes closed and his breathing slow and controlled. Harry usually did this every day in order to help clear his thoughts so he could think without being inundated with random memories. It didn't keep them away, but meditation at least ensured that he would not be bothered by them. When he was finished the clock read six on the dot.

Finally finished, Harry made his into the kitchen. He grabbed several bowls and two pans from a cupboard, some eggs, milk, cheese and butter from the fridge, and flower and sugar from the pantry. He turned on the stove, put the two pans on different burners before placing a spoonful of butter on each. He started placing the ingredients in the bowl, cracking

the eggs and mixing in the flower and milk, adding the sugar and some butter. As he worked in mixing the ingredients into a fine batter he hummed a little to himself.

He had learned to enjoy cooking in past five years, and had taken several cooking courses over one of his summers. His love of cooking was really one of the only reasons he still made breakfast and dinner for the Dursleys when ever he was home.

Once he was positive there were no clumps in the batter he moved over to the pans, the butter had melted and he made sure to spread it out evenly over the surface. With that done, Harry got out another bowl, cracked six eggs, added some salt and pepper, and whisked them enthusiastically. He always made something different for himself, not really interested in the less healthy food that his relatives seemed to enjoy so much.

Once the butter had melted and started to brown Harry poured the eggs into the frying pan and stirred it with the flat side of a fork. When the sides started to set, he lifted the side and pulled it into the center, repeating this until half of the eggs were set. He spooned three tablespoons of double cream onto the eggs, then liberally sprinkled it with some Balderson's Cheddar cheese and put it under the grill. He popped two pieces of toast into the toaster and moved over to the other pan and flipped the pancake on it. The sound of the door to the kitchen/living room caused him to look up from the eggs and pancakes he had been cooking.

"Aunt Petunia," Harry greeted with a curt nod. His relationship with his aunt was probably the strangest of the bunch. Neither of them liked each other, Harry may not hate the woman like he used to when he was younger, but he greatly disliked her and knew that she despised, or at the least, very much disliked him.

Of course, her feelings for Harry were so mixed in with other emotions that Harry could sense, but not make anything of that he was often left confused. However, Petunia was also something of his go-between for him and the other two Dursleys, who only spoke to him when absolutely necessary. Because of this, things remained somewhat cordial between them. Though Harry was sure part of the reason she was cordial was due

to fear.

"Good, you're making breakfast," said Petunia in a stiff and formal voice. "Try not to burn anything; I want everything to be perfect for my Duddy's birthday."

That's right, Harry thought to himself. Today was Dudley's birthday, it was rather hard to forget about that, mainly because it was rather difficult to miss all of the presents that were practically hiding the table they sat on top of. It looked as though Dudley had gotten the new computer he wanted, not to mention a second television and the racing bike. Exactly why Dudley wanted a racing bike was beyond Harry, as Dudley was very fat and hated exercise – unless of course it involved punching somebody. For the first six years of Harry's life, he had been Dudley's favorite punching bag. Of course, all that had changed when he had come into his magic. Now the pig-faced boy was even more afraid of him than his aunt.

"Yes, Aunt Petunia," Harry said in a humoring voice. They both knew there was nothing she could do if he decided to be rebellious.

Petunia sniffed, nodded, and headed back towards the stairs to get Dudley. Harry had nearly finished making breakfast by the time Dudley arrived in the kitchen with his mother. Dudley looked a lot like Uncle Vernon. He had a large pink face, not much neck, small, watery blue eyes, and thick blond hair that lay smoothly on his thick, fat head. Aunt Petunia often said that Dudley looked like a baby angel – Harry usually wondered how many branches his cousin hit when he fell from the fat and ugly tree.

Harry put the plates of pancakes, eggs and bacon on the table, which was difficult as there wasn't much room. He went back and grabbed his own food from under the grill, his toast, and sat down to eat. Dudley, meanwhile, was counting his presents. His face fell.

"Thirty-six," he said, looking at his mother and father. Harry was impressed that his cousin could count that far, he used to only be capable of counting the number of fingers on his hands. "That's two less than last year."

"Darling, you haven't counted Auntie Marge's present, see, it's here under this big one from Mommy and Daddy."

"All right, thirty-seven then," said Dudley, going red in the face. Harry, who could see a huge Dudley tantrum coming on, moved over to the counter top to eat in case Dudley turned the table over.

Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger too, because she said quickly, "And we'll buy another *two* presents while we're out today. How's that, popkin? *Two* more presents. Is that alright?"

Dudley thought for a moment. It looked like hard work for him. Finally he said slowly, "So I'll have thirty...thirty..."

"Thirty-nine, sweetums," said Aunt Petunia.

"Oh." Dudley sat down heavily and grabbed the nearest parcel. "All right then."

Uncle Vernon chuckled.

"Little tyke wants his money's worth, just like his father. 'Atta boy, Dudley!" He ruffled Dudley's hair.

There were a few moments of silence as everyone ate, and Dudley opened his presents. When they were finished, Harry took the plates away. As he grabbed Aunt Petunia's plate she fixed him with a look, "I do not want you here while we are at the zoo today."

Harry understood what she was really saying. Harry was never allowed in the house when no one was there; they did not trust him enough to leave him alone. "I plan on going to the Dao for a while, and then I'm going to head over to the library and meet up with Lisa," said Harry.

Petunia snorted, Vernon looked disgruntled, and Dudley looked constipated. When Harry was seven years old, he had found a small Dao that taught a variety of Chinese Martial Arts. It had taken various levels of violence threatened and a demonstration of Harry's magic by levitating several knives and floating them around the three Dursleys before he was allowed to go. Dudley had wanted to go as well, but ended up

quitting because it was too much work. None of them liked the fact that he went there, but could do nothing about it as Harry paid for his time there himself.

"Very well," said Petunia, while Vernon muttered about how 'freaks' shouldn't be allowed to learn how to fight.

Just then, the doorbell rang – "Oh, good Lord, they're here!" said Aunt Petunia frantically – and a moment later, Dudley's best friend, Piers Polkiss, waked in with his mother. Piers was a scrawny boy with a face like a rat. He was usually the one who held people's arms behind their backs while Dudley hit them. Or at least he was, before Harry decided to intervene every time he saw them about to start their bullying, whether they still did that when he wasn't around was unknown.

Not more than a few minutes later, the Dursleys and Piers were gone and Harry was walking to the Dao. Along the way he offered a small wave to Mr. Fig, a woman who owned several dozen cats and had, on rare occasion babysat him when he was younger, as well as a few other people in the neighborhood.

Because Harry paid for everything that was his, he had offered to mow the lawns of the residents of Privet Drive for five pounds an hour. While quite a few people had not trusted him, in no small part due to Petunia's gossiping about him being a horrible, demented child, Harry had found several people who had agreed to his offer, and pretty soon word had spread and he was mowing the lawn of nearly everyone on the entire block. Petunia had been pretty burned up about that since most people had discounted her words because Harry always made sure to remain respectful. It had been a long time before the horse-necked woman had gained her credibility with the other gossiping women of Privet Drive after that.

Half an hour later Harry reached a small, inconspicuous building that looked somewhat run down. The only reason anyone would have been able to recognize it as a martial arts Dao was the sign that showed two people in combat above the door.

Harry opened the door and entered.

The inside of the building was a simple looking room. At the front there was a small desk with an old, worn out cash register on top of it, there was a book case standing against the wall next to the desk forming a ninety degree angle, and was holding various books on combat, pressure points, acupuncture and medicinal plants. The area beyond the desk was covered by a large blue mat, on one side was a mirror that ran along the wall, on the other side were several stands that had swords, staffs, Kusari-gama's and even a scythe on them. At the end of the room was a hall with four doors.

"Ah, Harry, I was wondering if you would come in today," said a small, old Chinese man. Standing at a little shorter than Harry himself, Master Chang Wei did not strike an imposing figure. In fact, most people would have found his stature to be quite humorous. However, Harry did not let the man's size fool him. Despite being over seventy years old, Master Wei could beat Harry six ways to Sunday with one hand tied behind his back, hopping on one foot, while blindfolded. He had done it plenty of times in the past and could still do so now.

"Today is Dudley's birthday," said Harry, shrugging his shoulders. "I figured I would come here and see if you were up for a spar Master Wei."

When Harry had first found the Dao, he had been an enraged youth who was not only not afraid to threaten violence against his relatives, but had no compunctions on following through with his threats when his demands were not met. There had been several instances where Harry would use his powers to throw his uncle or cousin through a wall in order to get his way. That was part of the reason neither Dudley nor Vernon talked to him, and why Petunia feared him.

It was Master Chang Wei who had seen what the young boy was becoming, took Harry in and taught him that rage and hatred would not help him in life. When Master Wei's point had finally sunken in, Harry had been horrified to realize that he had been treating his relatives exactly how he had been treated. The very notion that he was becoming the very thing he hated had disgusted him so much that he had done his best to change, and vowed to never become like them.

It had taken Harry nearly a year of meditation, contemplation, and getting

pounded into the dirt while being told "Martial Arts is not just a way of fighting, but an art and an oath. An art that allows one to express themselves in movement, and an oath to never use combat and violence unless it is the only way to defend yourself and the innocent" by the old Chinese Martial Arts master before Harry had been able to move truly past most of his hatred of the Dursleys. He still didn't like them, and probably never would, but he wouldn't let himself be ruled by hatred. He was better than that. He was better than them.

"Same as every year, then," Said Master Wei. "Change into your uniform, and meet me on the mat."

"Yes, Master," said Harry, bowing before he went into the locker room that one of the doors at the end of the hall led to. He came back bare foot and wearing a simple white gi with a blue belt, only three steps down from a black belt. Harry was not only a quick study, but worked very hard to earn his rank and was considered to be something of a prodigy. Of course, that was only by the standards of the other students, according to Master Wei, he was a clumsy fool with no coordination and lacked the finesse needed to master the fine art of combat. Than again, Master Wei said that to everyone he taught so it didn't bother Harry too much.

"You know the routine, Harry," said Master Wei as Harry stood before him, looking straight ahead as was proper.

"Yes, Master," Harry dropped down on his feet and knuckles and began doing push-ups, counting in the basic Chinese number system until he reached a figure that Master Wei was satisfied with, that number being one hundred and twenty.

"Up!" Commanded the old man, and Harry kicked his feet up so that he was performing a handstand. It didn't take long for Harry to stabilize himself and find his balance, he had been doing this for so long now it was almost second nature.

"One hand!" Harry's breathing began to get heavy as he lifted his right hand so that he was standing on his left. When Wei commanded "Left!" he switched hands again.

"Bend!" said Master Wei. Harry let out a small grunt as his feet moved

over his head, and where he feet were previously facing away from the wall, they were now planted firmly on the ground facing the mirror as he formed a bridge with his stomach pointed to the ceiling –

"Oof!"

– only for Master Wei to kick his feet and knock him to the ground several seconds after the bridge had been formed, saying, "your form is not sturdy enough. Your form must always be like a wall, unmovable and strong. Were your form sturdy that little tap would not have been enough for you to fall."

"Yes, Master Wei," said Harry as he stood up, knowing better then to contest the small man. The last time he did Harry had gotten beat worse than usual.

"And now we spar."

Harry got into his opening combat stance after hearing Master Wei's words, left foot forward, right foot back, legs spread shoulder width apart while his knees were bent ever so slightly. He stood on the balls of his feet, prepared to shift or push off them at a moments notice. Along with his stance, Harry could feel a heightened sense of anticipation for the upcoming spar, the same feeling of adrenaline rush he always got when sparring with the diminutive master.

The fight, if one could call it that, was not so much of a fight as it was a beating, a beating that Harry was on the receiving end of. While Harry was actually quite talented at hand-to-hand combat, Master Wei had decades of experience over him, and from what he knew the man was a former soldier who had participated in the Vietnam war when he was only seventeen years old. Even with all of Harry's prodigal talents, he was simply no match for a man who had looked death in the face and survived overwhelming odds.

"I believe we are done for the day, young one," said Master Wei to a panting Harry. The young man was hunched over and taking in large gulps of air as if the stuff was going out of style. At least he wasn't laying prone on his back and nearing unconsciousness like he sometimes was after getting the crap kicked out of him. "Go wash up and head home."

Harry did as told, using the communal shower in the back to wash and get dressed in his street clothes, only instead of heading home, he went to the library.

Even before Harry had found the Dao the library had been a sanctuary for him. The story's that were found in books allowed for an escape from the realities of his life, the hardships he had endured and the scars it had left on his psyche. Harry had always been a fast study, in school he had learned what was taught long before the other students. During recess he used to spend his time in the school library, reading anything and everything he could get his hands on. Before Harry had really started coming to in his martial arts, he had been very anti-social, often spending all his recess and lunch in the library reading. When he had exhausted all of the books in the school library, he had asked a teacher, and been given directions to the public library, which was not that far from Private Drive or his school.

The library was not the largest in the world, with Surrey only being a small city the library reflected that size. It was still big enough that Harry doubted he could read everything in it before he managed to leave the Dursley's for good.

Grabbing a book, one that held historic battles of the Roman Empire, Harry made his way to the back where several comfy couches were for reading purposes. When he reached the reading area, he saw that there was somebody already there. A petite, cute girl around his age with short brown hair, brown eyes, and a look of slight impatience on her face. The girl looked up when she heard his footsteps and a smile lit her face.

"Harry!" she squealed, drawing a glare and "Sh!" from the librarian, which she basically ignored as she latched onto Harry in a hug.

"Lisa," Harry greeted with only the smallest of sighs as he returned her hug with one of his own, albeit, much less affectionately. Long time dealing with the girl had pretty much given him a handle on how to deal with her, but that didn't always make dealing with her any easier.

Lisa Crawft, he had met the girl somewhere around three years ago, about a year after he started his martial arts training. He had found her

being bullied by Dudley and his friends for some asinine reason. At the time, Harry had still been a somewhat troubled youth. Despite his training with Master Wei, he had been quick to anger. Seeing Dudley picking on someone had reminded him of all the times his cousin would hit him, and he had seen red.

After what could have only been described as a beat down, Dudley had ended up with a broken arm, two broken fingers, and a bruised torso, and the only reason he had not gotten worse injuries was because a passing teacher saw them and broke them up.

The Dursley's had not been too happy either, but they had not been able to do anything due to their fear of him. Master Wei on the other hand had found out and made his displeasure quite clear. Harry still shuddered when he thought about his teacher's punishment.

In spite of the violence he had unleashed upon his cousin, Lisa had become enamored with him. The next time he had seen her at school, she had latched onto him, proclaiming that he was her hero and had proceeded to follow him around whenever classes ended. Harry hadn't been too pleased by that at first, but later on learned to accept it. He had even discovered that there were benefits to be had by her befriending him.

One of the many benefits was that people found him more approachable, this allowed him to learn how to interact with others. He would never befriend any of the children he went to school with, they were just too different, but that didn't mean it wouldn't be good to learn the ins and outs of school yard politics, which is the basis for how humanity interacted with each other as a whole.

It didn't matter how intelligent or driven someone was, without knowing how to properly interact with others one could only go so far.

Moments later the hug ended and Lisa pulled back, a scowl marring her face. "You're late," she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest and sending him a mildly annoyed glare.

"Sorry," Harry apologized with a shrug as he walked over to the couch Lisa had been sitting on. "I got caught up in my spar with Master Wei." As

he finished speaking Harry sat down and opened the book to the first page. Lisa stared at him for a moment longer, before sighing and moving to sit down next to him.

"Honestly, I don't understand what a bookworm like you actually finds so fun about getting beaten up on by an old man," Lisa said, causing Harry to shrug once more. She was a girl, so of course she wouldn't understand what drove him to master his martial arts, nor could she understand the thrill he experienced while in combat. It was something most females just didn't seem to grasp, he noticed. There were plenty of benefits he gained from his martial arts training as well, a strong mind and body being just two of those things.

His thoughts were interrupted when Lisa leaned over his shoulder to look at the book he was reading and crinkled her nose.

"Ugh, history Harry? Really? Don't we read enough history at school?" she asked, her voice a tone of disgust. Lisa was never one for heavy reading like him, and what books she did read had absolutely nothing to do with anything school related.

"I like history," Harry replied without missing a beat. They had debated his choice of literature many times, and it always ended up the same, Harry not willing to give into Lisa's words, and Lisa shaking her head in dismay at his choice of reading material.

The last time they fought over what he read it had been when he found himself immersed in a book on psychology.

"I know you do," Lisa said with a tone of resignation. She perked up a second later however, and held out the book she had been reading. "Still, wouldn't you rather read something like this?" 'This' as his friend so eloquently put it was a book with a purple background covering. What really drew the eyes however, was not the color of the background, but the cover. On the cover were two half naked people, a man and a woman, their lower halves covered only by some kind of sheet. The male was on top of the woman, his hand resting against the lower left side of her back, while her hands were tangled through his hair. It was a rather erotic image, and unfortunately was not that unusual a covering for the

books Lisa read.

It was titled Seduction of a Highland Lass.

"Why would I ever want to read something like that?" asked Harry, honestly confused. Why anyone would want to read some trashy romance novel about fictional characters that wouldn't be out of place in the Conan the Barbarian Comic books he had read once was beyond him.

Lisa didn't seem to like his tone and huffed. "You just don't know a good story when you see one. This isn't just some trashy romance novel, it's an epic tale about..." At that point Harry began reading his book and made it a point to pretend he was no longer listening. It was unfortunate, but with his eidetic memory, every word the girl spoke would still be imprinted into his mind, so all he could do was pretend and hope she got the hint and stopped talking.

She did, about five minutes into her rant on how amazing her story was, Lisa noticed that Harry was not paying attention to her. She scowled for a moment, but seemed to decide not to try and claim his attention by doing something drastic, not only because it would get them kicked out but also because it was unlikely to work. Instead she huffed, and opened her book once more to begin reading.

Time wore on and Harry immersed himself within the history of the Roman Empire and its tragic fall. Contrary to what Lisa may think, the book in his hand was not a history book, but a romanticized tale that nonetheless gave an accurate description on the fall of Rome. It was a rather intriguing story, combining accurate historical knowledge with vivid details and epic battles. Whoever wrote the book had obviously done their homework.

It was only after an hour or so had past that Harry was drawn away from his book by the feel of a weight settling on his left shoulder. He turned his head to see that Lisa had fallen asleep, her book having fallen from her hands into her lap, her head resting against his shoulder as she leaned into him.

Unbidden a very small smile, very tender smile came to his face. He

would not tell anyone this, especially Lisa, but the girl truly was the only and best friend he'd ever had.

A part of this, he knew, was due to his feelings on the matter of friendship. By the time school started after the coming summer, it was very unlikely that he would see any of those people again. What was the point in befriending someone when you had no intention of keeping in touch? Another reason was simply because none of his acquaintances had anything to offer, Harry saw no benefit in befriending them, and thus, decided it would be best to keep them at arms length.

Of course, it wasn't like befriending Lisa carried any great benefits either. However, the girl had managed to worm her way into his heart by dint of sheer stubbornness. She had simply refused to let him continue on alone, and somehow, somehow, had managed to endear herself to him.

Not that she would ever know that. Harry was sure that if Lisa found out about his thoughts, she would never let him live it down.

If You're rereading this, you will know that I did not change a whole lot. Most of my grammar is still the same. The only thing I changed was the beginning, which is now first person rendition, and I fixed it so that instead of calling Master Wei's school a dojo, it's now called a Dao.

You don't have to let me know what you think of these changes, but I do hope you enjoy them.

The Letter

The Letter

It was cold and dark. For as long as I had been living with these new people who called themselves the Dursleys, the place that I called home became cold and dark, small and cramped; a tiny broom cupboard underneath the stairs. In the four years that I had lived with them, they rarely ever let me leave this cold, dark and small place; only to eat, work and use the bathroom.

Darkness had become my companion and my nightmares of the night my parents left me forever haunts my sleep.

As I lay there, curled up into a tiny ball on a set of ratty old blankets, I wondered what I had done wrong. Why was I living like this? Here? In this dark place, with no light and no warmth? What happened to my parents? My mum? Was she alright? What did that man do to her?

The woman, Petunia she called herself, said that my parents were drunkards who'd died in a car crash, but I know she's wrong. I don't remember any car crash. But that still didn't explain what happened. My mum, why had she stopped moving? Where was my dad? Did he leave? Did he not love me anymore? Did they both leave?

And just as importantly, what happened to that man? The one with the white skin and dark eyes? The one who had hurt my mum? Was he still out there? What if he had my mum and she was waiting for me to rescue her?

I wished there was something, anything that I could do. I wish I could leave this place and go to my parents. I wished I had the power to leave this place. If only I had power.

If only...

XoX

It was about an hour after Lisa had fallen asleep on his shoulder that Harry decided it was time to wake the girl from her comfortable slumber.

He slowly closed the book, it was already half way finished. One of the benefits about having eidetic memory was that he only had to skim over the page and he would still remember everything in it with more clarity than someone who had read the same book twelve times. Placing the book off to the side, he shifted a bit so he could place a hand on Lisa's shoulders and gently shake her awake.

"Lisa," he called out softly, not only because they were in a library and the librarian would not appreciate loud noises, but also out of reflex. The human mind was a strange and wondrous thing, and one of the things he had discovered about it was the instinctive reactions people did when placed in certain scenarios. The perfect example being how someone would speak softly to a person they were trying to wake, despite it being a very contradictory action. "Lisa, time to wake up."

"Mmm..." Lisa mumbled and turned her head to bury her face further into Harry's shoulder. "Five more minutes, mum..."

Harry sighed; this girl really was quite difficult.

"First off," he started, his voice now a bit louder. "I am not your mum. Second, it's starting to get late, and I doubt your real mum would approve of you being out when it gets dark."

His words seemed to have an effect on the girl as she began to slowly stir. Lisa took her head off his shoulders and blinked tiredly at him.

"Harry?" she asked, moving her hands up to rub her eyes. After a moment, she brought them back down and looked at him a bit more clearly, then she took a look around the library and blinked.

"Oh...it looks like I fell asleep," she said, sounding surprised. She cast a glance at Harry and gave him a sly look. "Or it could have been that book of yours. It was so boring it put me to sleep."

"Considering I didn't read to you, and you were reading another book entirely, I doubt that's the case," Harry replied dryly. With a shake of his head he grabbed the book and stood up. "Anyway," he continued, "it's

getting late so we should probably head back home."

"Yes, I guess you're right," Lisa said, standing up as well. She looked around for a second, before spotting the book she'd been reading, it was laying on the ground, presumably having dropped down there when she sat up. Leaning down, the girl picked it up, before following Harry to return her book and leave the library.

"Harry?" Lisa started once they were outside. The boy in question looked over at Lisa and raised his eyebrow when she saw her looking down at her feet. There was a very small red tint on her cheeks, and every now and then her eyes would move up to look at him, only to move back down towards where her sandaled toes were making patterns on the concrete.

He'd read about this in a book once. Sometimes when a girl wanted to ask a boy something, they'd get all shy and demure like this. It was only when they wanted something from a boy however, and the book didn't really explain why. He assumed the person who wrote didn't have the answer and was merely making an observational fact.

"Yes?"

"Will you...walkmehome?" she started out strong, but finished in a rushed, hurried voice. In spite of that, Harry made out her words just fine.

"Don't I always walk you home?" he asked, frowning in confusion. This was not the first time she had acted like this around him. In complete contradiction to her usually confident demeanor, Lisa would, every now and then, act like this. Harry wasn't quite sure what to make of it, it wasn't like there was a book to help male's understand the female mind after all; and he'd actually searched for some when Lisa first started acting like this.

"Well, yes, you do," Lisa muttered, the redness on her cheeks spreading to encompass more of her face. "It's just...I wasn't sure if you would want to today..." she trailed off, and Harry raised an eyebrow, before shaking his head.

"Come on," Harry said, hesitating for just a second before grabbing his friend's hand. Lisa looked up at Harry to see him offering the slightest of

smiles. "I'll walk you home."

Lisa gave him a brilliant smile, and together the two of them walked towards the girl's home.

Lisa's home was not that far from Harry's own residence at number four Privet Drive. Indeed, the girl only lived several blocks away from him, and it was in between his own place and the library. It was just another reason his friend's shyness at asking him to walk her home confused him. Her house was on the way to his, therefore they were both required to go the same way. Why wouldn't he walk her home?

Really, sometimes this girl was so confusing.

His friend's house was much different than the one he resided in. It was large, a two story house made of a combination of bricks, stone and red roofing. Unlike his relatives home, which was clean to the point of looking sterile, Lisa's house looked alive, for lack of a better term. At the very front of the house Harry spotted several rose bushes, none of which had the perfectly trimmed symmetrical look that Aunt Petunia prided about hers. The driveway in front of the garage possessed many chalk drawings that Lisa had made last week, something that would have given Uncle Vernon a fit. There were many smaller details to the house as well, little touches that just gave the house a more "lived in" feel.

They walked up to the front door and knocked. A beautiful woman with the same brown hair and brown eyes as Lisa opened it. The woman, Anastasia, was Lisa's mother, and what Harry assumed his friend would eventually look like when she grew up.

"Lisa, Harry," Anastasia greeted them both with a smile and her daughter with a hug. "Did you two have fun at the library?"

"Of course," said Lisa, before Harry interrupted her.

"She fell asleep."

"Oh my, she did?" asked Anastasia, giggling behind her hand when she saw her daughter's face turn red. As the young girl cast a glare at her friend, Anastasia cast her own knowing look at Harry, complete with a

smile and mischievous eyes. "And I imagine she decided to use you as a pillow, yes?"

Lisa's red face took on the same shade of a tomato, while Harry just nodded. "Indeed."

"Mom!" Lisa whined in an accusing tone as her mother giggled some more. She buried her now completely red face in her hands, embarrassed.

"I don't see what the big deal is," Harry started, his head tilting slightly. "You fall asleep on me all the time. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, I believe the first time I ever came to your house for dinner you used my shoulder as a pillow while we were watching a movie; Fantasia, I believe."

That had been a most, interesting experience for Harry, to say the least. Aside from the simple fact that it had been the first time he had ever been over to someone's house that did not involve lawn mowing or cleaning, it had also been his first real experience being Lisa's friend, a moment that gave him a glimpse of what being friends with this girl would be like.

It had been about a month or two after Lisa had truly become his friend—that is to say, after he had decided that he did, in fact, like Lisa and stopped trying to push her away—she had invited him over for dinner and he had accepted.

Dinner at the Crawft's was much different than dinner at the Dursley's. When he ate with his relatives they were always walking on eggshells around him, especially during dinner. Conversation was sparse, with very little in the way of eye contact. Indeed, it was almost as if his relatives were afraid to look him in the eyes for fear that he might be capable of delving inside of them and learning their deepest, darkest secrets.

Which was ridiculous. Aside from his ability to discern a person's motives and personality through their facial expressions and body language, Harry had no other ability that would come close to delving into the human mind. As far as he knew, such a thing was impossible.

Not to say that there wasn't a way, just that if it existed, he did not know of it. It was something Harry planned on studying later if he got the

chance.

In direct contradiction to dinner with the Durlsey's, the Crawft family was quite lively. Unlike meal times with his...relatives, dinner with Lisa's family was filled with conversation and laughter. Mrs. Crawft and Lisa would talk about anything and everything, and it was obvious to any who dined with the family that they actually cared about what the other had to say. If Harry were honest with himself, he would admit that he appreciated their antics. It was, in his opinion, how a family should act.

"Not you too!" Lisa groaned, her voice muffled as it was still buried in her hands. More laughter sprang from her mother and Lisa peeled her index and middle finger apart just enough to reveal a single eye, which glared at the woman who gave birth to her.

"I still don't see what the problem is." Harry shook his head.

"You don't see what the—" Lisa cut herself off mid sentence and finally pried both her hands away from her face to cast Harry an incredulous look. "Harry, they have an entire wall dedicated to the pictures they took of us...of me...I mean...of you and I..." she trailed off, her face burning.

"I am well aware of that," Harry admitted, causing his friend to cast him another look. "Unlike you, I was wide awake when they took those pictures." It was a benefit to being him. Harry wasn't quite sure why, but he had a lot of energy and rarely ever got tired. Case in point, he only needed a total of four hours of sleep each night for his body to operate at maximum efficiency.

"And you didn't think to wake me whenever they were about to do this?" Lisa asked with a bit of acid in her tone. Harry didn't let that get to him, he knew she was just embarrassed. Though why she would be embarrassed he didn't know.

"You obviously don't know how hard it can sometimes be to wake you up," Harry told her dryly. "Especially late at night when you're tired." While waking the girl up during the day was relatively easy, waking her up later during the evening was not. The girl was not only incredibly stubborn in her refusal to be roused from sleep, but also incredibly clingy. Normally, when she fell asleep during the times he stayed at her house, he would

simply carry her to her room and tuck her into bed, and even then, he had to pry her fingers from his clothing.

"Whatever," Lisa mumbled, turning away from the laughing Anastasia and the slightly confused Harry.

"So, Harry," Anastasia started, smoothly changing the subject after she got over her small fit of giggles. "Would you like to stay over for dinner tonight? I'm making Lasagna."

Harry tilted his head, considering the proposition. "I am not sure I should," he frowned. Dudley's birthday was today, and he had agreed with Aunt Petunia's request to clean up after the unwrapping of gifts in return for a trip to the optometrist so he could get a new prescription of contact lenses.

"Oh come on, Harry," Lisa said, grabbing her friend by the hand and beginning to pull him towards the door. "Your piggy little cousin won't be finished with his party until later. You know how fatty and his ratty friend is when it comes to pigging out."

"Lisa!" Anastasia admonished her daughter, but Lisa ignored her mother's words.

Harry frowned, his brow furrowing for a moment in thought. It cleared seconds later, and he gave a small smile. "Well," he began in a slow tone. "I suppose I could stay for a little while."

XoX

It was two hours later when Harry finally arrived at the Dursley's. The sun had almost finished its descend beyond the horizon. The sky was getting dark, with only the barest hints of dark orange and purple highlighting the atmosphere. Unlocking the door with his key, Harry silently entered the house.

Dinner with the Crawft's had been as interesting an experience as always. It seemed that every time he went there, there was something new for them to converse about. This time it was about a new movie that Lisa wanted to see, Hook, a fantasy tale about Peter Pan that apparently

starred Robin Williams. His friend had asked him if he would be willing to accompany her to it. Even if the movie hadn't sounded so interesting, Harry probably would have agreed to go, if for no other reason than his friend wanted to see it.

Not that she would ever know that.

It was not a surprise to him when he saw the mess that had been made of the living room upon entering it. Wrapping paper and boxes had been tossed about with impunity. He could even see several strands of string that had been used to tie a bow for decoration hanging off the ceiling fan. It looked like Dudley had once again shown his natural propensity for creating disaster zones within the house, as well as his parent's lack discipline when it came to him.

"Oh good, you're here," Aunt Petunia sniffed. She had just come out of the kitchen. No doubt Dudley had made a mess in there as well. "Dudley has finished unwrapping his presents..."

"I can see that," Harry replied as she trailed off. He looked around the room, then back at Aunt Petunia. "Do not worry, I will clean this place up as per our agreement." Aunt Petunia opened her mouth, then closed it. She seemed to want to say something, but did not know how to say it. In the end, she simply gave him a stiff nod, then scuttled back into the kitchen, leaving Harry to the mess his cousin had made.

He smiled. His aunt had no trouble making use of his talents, but didn't want to be present for it. How amusing.

Casting one more glance around the room, Harry closed his eyes. It would take a bit more energy to clean this mess up; it was rather large, after all. Accessing the hidden well of power that had been at his disposal for as long as he could remember, the raven-haired youth prepared to commit an act that would freak out his relatives if they ever saw it.

A slow exhale of breath. Harry lids fluttered open. Green eyes glowing with power. He snapped the fingers of his left hand, and the many boxes, wrapping paper, and ribbons disappeared. Gone. As if they had never existed in the first place.

Harry breathed in deeply, regaining his breath after using so much of his power to clean the room. He still had plenty to spar, but it was always tiring to use that much in a single sitting. And disintegrating, as he called it, took quite a bit more concentration than levitation did.

With the room clean Harry made his way upstairs, entering his room and shutting the door. He took off his shoes and his shirt, and allowed them to float away. The shirt landed in his dirty bin hamper, while his shoes set themselves in a small, open space under his bed. Harry Potter moved further into the room, and sat himself down cross legged in the center.

He took a glance around the room, decently furnished, if a bit small. It was a room he had lived in for six years, and hopefully one that he would soon only come to live in during the summer. Just a few more weeks, he surmised.

Soon.

Closing his eyes, Harry began his nightly routine of clearing his mind of all thoughts.

He would stay that way until ten o'clock that night.

XoX

Time wore on; days turned into weeks and before long, the school year was over. Like always, Harry had gotten top marks and several recommendations from his teachers; and like always, Harry kept his progress reports from his relatives. They did not care what he got, and he did not care what they thought. By the time summer holidays had started Dudley had ended up breaking his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and the first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.

Harry had never really liked summer. While he never learned anything that he did not already know in class thanks to constantly reading ahead in school, it at least gave him something to do, even if it was busy-work, and because it was so hot there were no sports during the summer either, which meant football was out as well unless he joined one of those hardcore leagues where all they did was breath, eat and sleep football.

Really, the only thing he had to do during the hot season was sparring with Master Wei and his peers at the dao, and spending time with Lisa. Now he would admit to enjoying both, but it wasn't like he could do both every second of every day. There were quite a few hours in a day, and while most people spent around sixteen of them awake, Harry spent twenty, meaning when everyone else was asleep, he was still up and energized.

At least Dudley and his friends Piers, Dennis, Malcolm and Gordon, who were all as stupid as Dudley himself, no longer played Harry hunting. No longer because the few times Dudley got the courage to try they all got beaten up (It was after Harry had started Martial Arts), and Dudley's parents could do nothing about it, lest Harry use his magic to send them through a wall.

Still it was not all bad; Harry spent whatever time he could at the dao, sparring with many of the students. Being one of the better students in class, Harry would often fight against students several years older than himself, which was a big ego booster for him—until Master Wei brought it back down with another beating. Nothing deflated egos like getting your arse kicked by a 70-year old man, even if he was a master in fifteen different martial arts.

Other than spending time sparring, Harry also spent time at the library, and with Lisa and her mum. Lisa often took him to the mall where they would window shop, before grabbing a small bite to eat at a local cafe. There were a few times they would go to the park as well, but his friend often complained about the heat, so they only did that during the evenings before dinner.

One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smelting uniform. Dudley had been accepted to Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry had spent that time at Lisa's house watching movies, eating his favorite foods and ended up staying the night.

It was a good thing for Harry too, as that day Dudley had paraded around in his new uniform for his parents, not that it had spared him from that the next day. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers,

and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobby sticks used for hitting each other while teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life. Just what that training was for Harry didn't know and felt it was a stupid tradition that just stuck around due to the people running the school lacking common sense.

The next morning after everyone had finished eating, they all heard the click of the mail slot and the flop of letters on the doormat.

"Harry," Aunt Petunia started, but Harry was already on the way towards the mail, knowing what she would ask.

Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and—a *letter for Harry*.

Harry's breath caught in his throat as he picked it up and looked it over. He knew what this was. He had been expecting, *waiting* for it since he was seven and intelligent enough to understand what his memories meant. Even without checking it, he knew what it contained. After all, no one sent him mail. Master Chang didn't send him anything that he could not walk over and pick up himself, and Lisa and her family lived within walking distance. There was no other explanation as to what this could be, especially with the way it was addressed:

Mr. H. Potter

The Smallest Room on the Second Floor

#4 Privet Drive

Little Whinging

Surrey

The envelope was thick and heavy, made from yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.

Turning the envelope over in his hand, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger and a snake

surrounding a large letter *H*.

"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. It was the first time the large man had spoken to him in all of a year.

Harry went back into the kitchen, an odd smile on his face as he walked in. Odd, because he almost never smiled around his relatives. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, then he turned to Aunt Petunia.

"It came," he said. It was all he needed to say. Petunia gasped and went pale, Vernon began turning puce and Dudley, as always, looked constipated.

"I-I-I see," Aunt Petunia finally managed to get out. Uncle Vernon just made choking noises.

Harry sat down, feeling jittery from the anticipation, taking a deep breath he opened the letter and read the contents:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorcerer, Chief Warlock,

Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Terms begin on September 1st. We await your owl by no later than July 31st.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Minerva McGonagall,

Deputy Headmistress

"We await your owl," Harry read again, out loud this time. He took a moment to make sure he had not missed anything, then looked up at Aunt Petunia and said, "you know where to get school supplies." It was not a question.

"Yes, I know that...place where my *sister* bought her school supplies is," Aunt Petunia sniffed. She had been forced to go with her parents and sister decades ago when a then Lily Evans received her Hogwarts letter. She could still remember the day, the disgusting way her parents doted over her sister and how happy Lily was. She never thought she would have to deal with that world again.

Funny how life works against us sometimes.

"Then you will give me directions to this place," Harry said. "In return, I will make breakfast, lunch and dinner for your family until it's time for me to leave for Hogwarts at least...three times a week."

Petunia, who had opened her mouth to deny helping him getting any supplies for school, closed it upon hearing his offer. This was how things usually went now. Harry would offer a compromise in order to get what he wanted. He could just threaten her; they both knew that, but Harry was better than that, was better than the Dursleys who would've threatened him had their situations been reversed. He would not resort to violence unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Very well," Petunia said at last. "Tomorrow we'll take you to...*that* place," she shuddered at the thought of going back there.

"NO!" Vernon roared as he suddenly stood up and glared at Harry. "You're not going to that school! The last thing we need is for even more freakishness from you! I won't let you go somewhere that'll have you learning any of that ridiculous wand-waving and freaky unnaturalness! I've put up with more than enough from you!"

"Vernon!" Petunia gasped, her face paling. She looked over at Harry, whose face held a look of mild annoyance. Of course, any expression on Harry's face often times greatly downplayed the emotions he felt. It was

very rare for him to actually display his thoughts and feelings in such a way that someone else may be able to notice through observation.

Harry's finger twitched. The urge was there. It was small, but the desire to use his magic, lift his uncle into the air and hurl him through a wall was there.

He resisted. He was better than them; better than his uncle who used to give him lashings; better than his Aunt who pretended he didn't exist unless she wanted something; better than his cousin who was a bully who enjoyed picking on those weaker than himself. He was better than all of them, and he would not stoop to their level.

Still, the urge was there, a whisper in his mind. It existed, no matter how hard he tried to ignore it.

"I'm surprised at you, Uncle Vernon," he said instead, his voice mild mannered and reasonable. "After all, if I were to go to this school, you wouldn't have to see me for nine whole months."

"Nine months?" Vernon's eyes lit at the thought. Harry could see the wheels in his uncle's fat head turning. On the one hand, he clearly did not want Harry to learn anymore magic, or freakishness, as he was so fond of calling it. But on the other hand, not having to deal with Harry for nine months out of the year was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"Nine months," Harry confirmed. "Nine months without seeing or hearing from me. Nine months without my...freakishness." Here, he smiled a cold smile that caused Vernon to flinch. It seemed he remembered quite clearly times when Harry had not been as...tolerable as he was now.

"Nine months..."

The look of fear gave way to a look of thoughtfulness. Yes, nine months was quite a long time. No doubt his uncle was thinking of all the things he could get done without having to deal with his magic using nephew. Harry could almost see the cogs in the fat walrus of a man's head grinding together, turning with pandering slowness; he could practically see the man's thought process.

"Very well," he said after a few minutes pause. "I will allow you attend this...*school*." He grimaced, clearly not pleased with the idea, but it looked like the thought of going nine months without having to deal with Harry was the better end of the deal in this instance.

"We have an accord then," said Harry, before making his way towards his room. It wouldn't do for his relatives to see how excited he was.

Hogwarts. He would finally be going to Hogwarts. Harry had been told quite a bit about the most premiere school for magic in all of Great Britain. He didn't know everything. Most unfortunately, everything he knew of Hogwarts came from the stories his parents, Padfoot, Moony and Wormtail told him before his mum and dad were killed. Tales of the Marauders and the pranks they had pulled; of the classes they had taken; of the spells they had learned. He knew much about his parents time at Hogwarts, even though he only knew a bit about the school itself. Still, what he had heard was more than enough to excite him.

He would be following in his parents footsteps. Continuing their legacy. He would be going to the very same school they went to, and he would make them proud.

And most importantly.

He would be learning magic.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter. Next chapter is Diagon Alley.

Small Time Crises

Small Time Crises

I cried out in alarm and pain as my back slammed against the other side of the broom cupboard. Agony lanced up my spine and my already hurt arm began to feel like Uncle Vernon had stepped on it and ground his heel against it.

"You'll be staying in there for the rest of the week to think about what you did, boy! I won't be having anything unnatural going on in this house!"

The door slammed closed with a loud 'BANG!' and I was engulfed in the darkness of my home once more. As the light disappeared tears sprung to my eyes, both from the pain in my back and arm, as well as from Uncle Vernon's words.

I still don't understand how what I did was wrong. All I wanted was for the blocks that Dudley was throwing at me to not hurt anymore. Could they be upset because I made the blocks turn into feathers? But I used to do that all the time with mum and dad. They had always been so proud of me whenever I would float something or change something into something else. They never got angry or upset, never scolded me; how could what I did be bad?

Gingerly, I sat up, wincing and fighting back another cry as pain shot straight up my back. Trying not to grimace, I finished sitting up and brought my arm up to look at it. I couldn't see it, though, my eyesight has never been that good, even so, I knew that if I had some light to see with all I would find was a large bruise where Uncle Vernon had slammed my arm into a wall while dragging me to my cupboard.

Not knowing what else to do, I curled up into a ball and tried not to cry. I failed, and began crying anyways, though I did not make any noise. Uncle Vernon would get upset if he heard me.

And so I cried in silence. But these were not tears of pain though, no, I

had been hurt worse before. These were tears of frustration, tears of anger, but most of all, they were tears of hate. I hated my relatives, the people I called aunt, uncle and cousin. I hated the whole lot of them. I hated them so much that just thinking about how much I hated them made my head hurt.

As I lay there, shedding tears and cursing the day I had been stuck with these people, I could not help but think that all of this would be different if I had the power to defend myself.

If only I had power.

If only...

XoX

The very next morning, Harry Potter, still sitting cross-legged on the floor, opened his eyes with a sigh. He had been meditating all night, unable to clear his mind and unable to sleep. He was too excited.

Today was the day he took his first steps on the path that his parents had walked. He would be going to get his school supplies at a place called Diagon Alley. He had spoke at length with Aunt Petunia last night about how to get there. His Aunt, though hesitant and obviously miffed about discussing a topic she had no desire to remember, answered all of his questions to the best of her ability. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

In one fluid motion Harry brought himself from a sitting position to a standing one. He moved over to the window. It was early, the sun was just now rising, casting rays of light upon the land before him. It was too early to go to Diagon Alley. Uncle Vernon was unlikely to even be awake. A pity.

Seeing how it was Saturday, Harry had nothing to do but take a shower and get prepared. He didn't exercise on Saturdays, instead letting his body rest and recover from the arduous tasks he put it through during the week. With that thought in mind, he went into the bathroom, washed himself off, then got dressed in a pair of dark green pants, a black sleeveless shirt, a collared button up shirt the same color as his pants and his converse shoes.

He then practiced his magic for the next hour, levitating a football around his head. To add some more difficulty to the task, he took to changing it into something else. A flower. A book. A cup. His abilities at transformation were much more limited than his levitating abilities. It required far more concentration to change an object into something else than it did to lift said object into the air. Still, with enough effort, application of power and proper visualization, he was quite capable of making the transformations in time. When a sufficient amount of time had past, Harry decided to go down and make breakfast.

Breakfast itself was a silent affair. No one would speak. Aunt Petunia because of the conversation yesterday; Uncle Vernon because of the fact that he would be driving his 'freak' of a nephew to get supplies for his 'freakish school' today; and Dudley because he was stuffing his face to the brim with pancakes.

Harry ate his breakfast silently: scrambled eggs with a side of toast and a glass of orange juice. When everyone was done, he grabbed the plates and made to wash them. It was during this time that conversation finally started.

Uncle Vernon looked up from his morning newspaper. His face was puce colored, agitated, but he managed to reign himself in and refrained from saying anything stupid. It was an admirable show of restraint—for him at least.

"So this place I need to take you..." Vernon began, trailing off as his face somehow managed to both grimace and glare at the same time.

"The Leaky Cauldron," Harry supplied. Vernon grunted.

"Right, will I need to pick you up?"

"No," Harry supplied. "I can take a cab," he lied, as always. Harry only took a cab when he did not know where he needed to go. Once he saw the place he was to be visiting today, he would no longer require any kind of transportation other than his own magic.

"Good," Vernon grunted again, then went back to reading his morning news. Harry rolled his eyes and finished his task. Time past and before

long Harry was being driven through the streets of London by his disgruntled uncle. The man held onto the steering wheel tightly, his face still colored, the leather of the steering wheel creaking under his harsh grip. Harry paid little attention to his uncle as he looked out the window, his mind occupied with other, more important thoughts.

Hogwarts. He wondered what he would learn when he finally arrived. Would they be the same as his own brand of magic? Harry knew that witches and wizards used wands in their magic. His mother had one, his father had one, the few people he had seen before they went into hiding had one. He had watched them use their wands many times, waving them in the air in intricate patterns, chanting incantations in Latin. He wondered if his magic was even the same as their magic. Or did the fact that he didn't need a wand make his magic different? Time would tell, he supposed.

Enhancement, healing, levitation, transformation, teleportation. Those were the five branches of magic Harry was capable of. He would have included disintegration in there, but that was more of a sub branch to transformation than it was it's own branch of magic. Harry had experimented with these powers quite a bit, and came to the conclusion that they were useful, but limited. He had seen his mother and father do quite a bit more with their wands than he could do without one.

A part of it, he was sure, simply had to do with time and training. He had only started consciously using his magic when he was six—five years ago. His parents had to have been at least in their thirties when they had been killed. They had at least two decades over him in experience. Harry was sure that with enough practice and training, he could accomplish everything they did with a wand without one. All it would take was time.

The car slowed to a stop and Uncle Vernon grunted. "We're here."

Harry nodded absentmindedly, unstrapped his seat belt, opened the car door and stepped out. "Thank you, Uncle Vernon," he said politely. His uncle merely grunted and, the moment Harry closed the door, he sped off. Harry didn't bother watching his uncle's car disappear around a corner, merely turned about to look at the place that supposedly lead to Diagon Alley.

It was a bar of some kind, from the looks of it. A place named the Leaky Cauldron. It was a grubby looking place, and were it not for the fact that Aunt Petunia had given Uncle Vernon very implicit directions, Harry was sure the man would have missed it. This was due more to the fact that no one even seemed to realize it was there. The people hurrying by didn't even glance at it. Their eyes slid from the big book shop on one side to the record shop on the other as if they couldn't see the place at all. In fact, Harry was quite sure that out of all the people wandering around, he was the only one who could see it.

He wondered about this. Was there some kind of enchantment that made it invisible? A spell that made it so only those who could use magic could see it? It made sense. Harry could feel the hum of magic in the air, emitted from the Leaky Cauldron, sending a pleasant tingle down Harry's spine. The magic of this place was a palpable thing.

With his curiosity running in the forefront of his thoughts, Harry entered the pub known as the Leaky Cauldron. He was unsure of what to expect, but when he saw what the inside looked like, he was most disappointed.

The pub was dark, dank and dirty. There was very little in the way of light, and only a few candles here and there could be seen in the room, casting shadows along the walls and floor in equal measure. The tables were all dusty; they looked like they hadn't been cleaned in months, and the few people he saw sitting around at the tables were equally unkempt. A few old women sat in a corner, drinking tiny glasses of sherry. Smoke blew from the mouth of one as she exhaled after smoking from a long pipe. A little man in a top hat talked to the old bartender, who reminded him of a toothless walnut. Harry couldn't help but wonder at these people and their mostly underwhelming looks. Did they have no pride in their appearance?

No one seemed to have noticed him yet. Given how low the lighting was Harry was not surprised; it would be hard to make out the features of those a few inches in front of them, much less someone several feet away. A part of him wished he could stay like this, anonymous. He wasn't quite sure he wanted to associate with these people, men and women who looked like they had no pride in themselves. But he knew that in order to get into Diagon Alley, he would need someone to open the path

for him. With this thought in mind, Harry walked over to the bartender and tapped on the bar table to get his attention.

"Excuse me, sir?" Harry started, his words grabbing the man's attention. He would have spoken further, but the moment the old man's eyes landed on him, they widened. The man nearly dropped the cup he was cleaning, his surprise was that great. Harry shifted uncomfortably. The man was looking at Harry Harry like he had just seen god. It was very disturbing.

"Good Lord," said the bartender, "is this—can it be—?"

The Leaky Cauldron had suddenly gone completely still and silent. The silence unnerved Harry. He could feel the eyes of those around him now on him and the bartender.

"Bless my soul," whispered the old bartender, "Harry Potter... what an honor."

A stiffening of the spine was Harry's sole indication of surprise, and in the darkened room, even someone as skilled as he was in the art of observation would have missed it.

This man knew him. He knew his name. How was that possible? Harry had rarely ventured beyond his parents' cabin when he was in the magical world, and never ventured into the magical world while he lived with the Dursleys. Before his parents went into hiding he had gone over to Padfoot's house a couple of times, and once or twice he had gone out to fly a broom with his father. But he had never ventured into Diagon Alley, never been inside of the place known as the Leaky Cauldron. So how did this man know of him?

His questions would, unfortunately, go unanswered. With a speed Harry had not expected the bartender to possess, the man moved from behind the counter to stand directly in front of him. The man who looked like a walnut grabbed his right hand in both of his, shaking it furiously, tears staining his eyes.

Harry could feel the eyes of those around him. The old woman with the pipe was puffing on it without realizing it had gone out, the ones drinking

sherry had stopped with the glass half raised to their lips, their drinks spilling over the side. The man in the top hat that had been talking to the bartender was gawking at him like he was some kind of circus display, and everyone else in the room held similar looks. This entire situation had just gone from strange to highly disconcerting within seconds.

"Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back."

This seemed to be the cue everyone was waiting for. There was a great scraping of chairs and the next moment he was being mobbed by everyone else in the room.

"Doris Crockford, Mr. Potter, can't believe I'm meeting you at last."

They crowded around Harry, jostling him and each other so they could get close to him.

"So proud, Mr. Potter, I'm just so proud."

Many began to shake his hand, grabbing and jerking said appendage in their own grip, not even taking into consideration the fact that he might not want to.

"Always wanted to shake your hand—I'm all a flutter."

Those who could not shake his hand grabbed his clothes. Their hands clawed at him, clutching his shirt, his pants, his hair; greedy, grubby hands from people he didn't know touching him everywhere.

They were all talking to him as well. Harry could not even get a word in edge wise, though not for lack of trying. He did try to speak, many a time he opened his mouth, only to close it as the cloying scent of so many bodies filled him. The smell of alcohol on those who had consumed too much. The terrible, rancid stench of smoke from the witch that had been puffing on the pipe. The noxious fumes of sweat, combined with the scents of so many different people. It was impossible for Harry to speak when each time he sucked in a breath, the disgusting scent of a dozen bodies pervaded his nostrils.

Even if he could speak it wouldn't have mattered. The many people

around him weren't even paying attention to him. So caught up in their own excitement were they that they hardly noticed the boy they clawed at so brazenly. Their voices were raised, each one trying to be heard over the others. It only caused the volume in the room to increase exponentially. Even if Harry was capable of speech right now, he would not have been heard.

Harry felt panic rise up inside of him. There were few things in this world that he truly feared, at least that he knew of. Of those things the one he feared the most was the unpredictable. The things he could never see coming no matter how hard he looked, no matter how much he knowledge he acquired, no matter how many memories he accumulated. To see so much yet never notice when something is coming, never even think about it happening, or how it could happen. It was a terrifying thing for Harry.

There were several facets of Harry that he took great pride in. The first was his intelligence. Harry Potter was smart, he knew that, his peers knew that, and his teachers knew that. He was the top student in his class, and though none of his teachers knew this, he was far ahead of every subject they taught. He was almost sure that he could graduate from Secondary school with top marks with how much he knew right now—though that could just be pride speaking.

The second aspect he took great pride in was his skill martial arts. Harry was the best student under his master's tutelage. While there were those who were better than him, none of them learned as quickly as he did. Each day he became just a little better, each day he was one step closer to matching the black belts of his class. While Master Wei may insult him about his form, he knew it was just the old man's way of saying he still had a long way to go, and ensuring that he did not get a big head.

Thirdly, Harry took great pride in his appearance. Harry had a body that no eleven year old boy should possess. His body was defined by hard, sinuous muscles. Like a whipcord, taut, strong and meant to be used. His muscles were the kind that only came from constant use and training, not the bulky and outlandish ones people gained from going to the gym.

Of the aspects he prided himself on, the fourth was a recent addition,

gained only within the last two years. Harry prided himself on his reputation. As a student, Harry was looked up to by everyone, both for his vast intelligence and his helpful demeanor. He enjoyed the respect and admiration his fellow students had for his accomplishments, and how he was always willing to lend a helping hand, even if he did not particularly like any of the people he called peers.

Out of all the aspects he prided himself on, it was the fifth that he took the most pride in. Thanks to his perfect memory, Harry's talent in observation went far beyond those of anyone else's. It only took him a single glance at something to pick up every single detail of whatever he was looking at. Due to this, and the many subjects he studied, Harry's ability to predict the way people would react to stimuli both outside and inside was unprecedented. He only need a few minutes speaking with someone to have most of their personality down to a T. After that it was a very simple matter for him to predict what they would do in any given situation.

It was this ability which failed him right now. These people that were mobbing him, he had never expected them to, could have never even hoped to anticipate this happening. Were he not in the beginning vestiges of panic he would have probably begun asking questions. Why were these people reacting like this? How did these people know him? Just what had he done to deserve such recognition? In most cases, it would have been clear to him that he was severely lacking in the necessary information that would allow him to come up with a logical conclusion. As things were, his mind was in such disarray from the many people mobbing and grasping at him that he couldn't even think.

The people around him didn't seem to notice his discomfort, or that he was starting to shake with the beginnings of a panic attack. They did not see how his breathing was starting to get labored, or how black spots began forming at the edge of his vision. Due to him being the sole attention of damn near everyone in the room, they did not see or hear the tables, the chairs and all the glasses and table wear in the room begin to jitter and shake. Fortunately for Harry and the people currently harassing him, someone did.

XoX

Minerva McGonagall was sitting in the Leaky Cauldron that morning, lightly sipping at some black tea with a bit of cream while she looked over a list that sat upon her table. The list was of those students who she was to meet today. She had done this every year since becoming the Head of House Gryffindor. Each year she before the school year started, McGonagall would get an early start and head towards the Leaky Cauldron, where she would have a cup of tea before heading off to meet her potential students.

Currently, her eyes were scanning the list, the steaming cup of black liquid slightly tanned by cream beside it. At the top of the page was her first student, one Hermione Jean Granger. The girl was from a well-to-do family, as far as McGonagall could tell; her parents were dentists and made a nice living for themselves. There wasn't much more information than that, just the address she needed to take the Hogwarts acceptance letter to.

"Good Lord, is this—can it be—?"

As soon as the words had been spoken, McGonagall, like everyone else, had turned towards the source. Her eyes had widened at the sight before her: a young boy, thin, but not skinny, his muggle clothing framed his form nicely. Raven locks sprang from his head in a messy bird's nest. Emerald green eyes glowed the same color as those of the killing curse. She knew that hair and those eyes; they belonged to two of her most favorite students. And she knew this young man, even if she had not seen him since he was a baby.

She was then subject to watching as the young man was mobbed by a horde of well-wishers. For a moment she felt disgust well up within her. How could these people just invade a person's personal space like that? Was there no common decency in this world anymore?

Disgust soon turned to pity as she watched the people clawing at the boy, trying to shake his hand, trying to touch him. They were loud, impossibly so, as they offered platitudes and salutations, and McGonagall didn't even want to think about how the volume of the shouting horde of fans must be up close.

Pity soon gave way to alarm. Being the only person in the room who was not only *not* mobbing the boy, but also on the other side of the room, McGonagall saw the tableware begin to shake, candles started to flicker and the air grew heavy. Magic. She could almost feel the magic in the air, and it was all emanating from the boy. She looked back at the boy, his face looked panicked; McGonagall knew she had to act.

Casting away her surprise at seeing such a harsh display of accidental magic from one who should be too old to have cases of accidental magic, McGonagall stood up and marched headlong into the horde of excited witches and wizards. She pushed and shoved and glared her way to the center, where she found Harry Potter, his breathing labored and his body shaking. Her anger increased. She grabbed the boy by the arm, helping him keep his balance, and began making her way out of the mob. Those who tried touching the boy again became the subject of the most stern glare she could muster, which under the circumstances, was about ten times worse than what she usually gave when people around her were misbehaving. It was a look everyone in the pub had seen before, albeit, its terror inducing abilities magnified by a factor of ten, and no one wanted to be on the receiving end of. They began to back off. McGonagall managed to get outside to the back of the pub. There, she let go of Harry, who dropped to his hands and knees, his body still shaking.

"Are you alright, Mr. Potter?" she asked, her voice concerned as she looked him over. While he did not appear to have suffered any physical damage, his body was shaking and his brow was glossed over with a sheen of sweat. He looked to be on the verge of a heart attack. It was quite worrying.

"I..." Harry sucked in a deep breath, his teeth grit. "I'm fine." He pushed himself backwards, landing on his butt, and McGonagall watched the young man force himself into a cross-legged position. His eyes closed, his breathing slowed, and ever so slowly, his shaking ceased. McGonagall found herself both worried and impressed. She had no clue what he was doing, but it seemed to be some kind of calming exercise. Perhaps a strange form of clearing your mind like those used by Occlumens.

Emerald green eyes snapped open once more, fixing McGonagall with their piercing stare. The Hogwarts Professor was surprised by how sharp his eyes were now compared to a few moments ago. Just how a boy so young could regain control of himself so quickly when only those who were talented in the mind arts should be capable of such feats was beyond her.

The boy stood up, dusting himself off, before straightening to his full height. He gave her a slight bow of his head in gratitude. "Thank you for that," he began, "I had not been expecting something like that to happen to me today and was caught by surprise. I appreciate your help in getting me out of there."

McGonagall frowned, not only due to his words, but also due to how he had reacted to all those people. Granted, getting mobbed by several dozen people was bound to make anyone freak out a little bit, but the way Harry had nearly lost control of his magic had been startling. Then there were his words, there was just something about the way he spoke that seemed... off. It was too old, she would say. He sounded like someone twice his age, and it bothered her a good deal.

She didn't say anything about this, however, and merely inclined her head.

"It is quite alright, Mr. Potter," she said, before getting down to business. There was something else about his presence here that bothered her a great deal. "Now, perhaps you can tell me just what you are doing here without the witch or wizard who was sent to escort you through Diagon Alley?"

That was what she was most curious about. It was not just tradition that caused each Head of House to meet with and speak to the families of muggleborn's that would be going to Hogwarts each year. It was necessity. The magical world was a hidden one, kept from the prying eyes of those who did not have magic through the use of enchantments and spells. Those children born to non-magical parents would know nothing of the world they belonged to, and it was the duty of the teacher's at Hogwarts to inform them and their parents of the world the child in question was a part of.

It was the same for Harry Potter, though the circumstances were different. Harry was what one would call Muggle-raised. Born to a wizarding family, yet raised in a non-magical household due to a series of complications. And while McGonagall knew that his aunt had passing knowledge of the wizarding world, the woman did not know nearly enough to help Harry start his first year at Hogwarts. It was a wonder he'd even managed to find the Leaky Cauldron!

"I'm sorry," Harry started, his lips forming a frown. "But just how is it that you and everyone else seem to know my name?"

McGonagall blinked. Frowned. Then blinked again. Finally, her mind registered the words and she was almost tempted to rub her temples in order to stifle the coming headache.

This was not good. Not good at all.

XoX

Minerva McGonagall was a stern looking woman. Her face was lined with age, and her lips seemed to be in an almost constant line that denoted neither sadness nor anger, neither hate nor love, neither joy nor depression. It was almost like she was in teacher mode all the time, he mused.

Harry Potter listened with rapt attention as Professor McGonagall, Headmistress of Hogwarts and Head of the House of Gryffindor explained why he was so famous to him. It was a most unusual experience, he had to admit. Being told by someone else that he was famed for defeating the darkest wizard of the century. He was not quite sure what to think about that, but if nothing else, he knew her words to be true.

It was also disconcerting to discover that everyone in the wizarding world knew of what happened that night. It seemed that in the ten years he had been left on the Dursley's doorstep, those living in the world of magic had been celebrating his victory over the man known as Voldemort. This man had apparently started a war within magical Britain, one that had nearly destroyed the wizarding world and almost leaked over into the non-magical one. With his Death Eaters by his side, Voldemort had carved a

bloody path through the world of magic. Many witches and wizards had been killed. No. Not killed. Killed isn't a strong enough word. Neither was murdered. Most of the victims to Death Eater attacks had suffered horrendously before being allowed the sweet embrace of death.

Most of those who had been killed were muggleborn's, those whose families were not magical. According to Professor McGonagall, this Lord Voldemort was an advocate of "Pureblood rights." He believed that those who were born into a family with magic were of a higher stock than those without it, and that those without it should either be killed, or enslaved. It reminded Harry of what he'd learned about Adolph Hitler, whose hatred of those of Jewish religion was well known.

Another thought occurred to Harry, one that caused him to almost frown. That night nearly ten years ago when his parents had been slain, he remembered it so well, and yet until this moment he knew next to nothing about it. All he had known was that a man calling himself Voldemort had come to his house, killed his parents and tried to kill him. Nothing else. He had had no context for that no night, no clue as to why it happened. All he had known was that it did. Until now, at least.

It was one of the disconcerting aspects of having eidetic memory. His mind could only recall what it remembered, and while it remembered everything that did not mean it knew everything. He could have the memories of something he had seen happen, anything, recall it down to the smallest detail, but sometimes, without the context of what happened *before* the incident everything he saw, and everything he remembered, could be rendered useless. This was an experience he was becoming intimately familiar with now, and he had to admit, he did not like it. Not one bit.

Harry made a note to correct this oversight as soon as possible, preferably when he entered Diagon Alley.

Professor McGonagall stopped speaking. It had been nearly an hour since she had started as there had been a lot to tell. Throughout it all Harry had sat at the table, back straight, hands clasped on the hard grain surface, a look of interest on his face. When the stern looking woman finally stopped speaking, Harry leaned forward slightly, his eyes boring

into hers as he digested her words.

"So you're telling me that everyone in all of Britain knew what happened that night Voldemort had killed my parents and tried to do the same to me?"

McGonagall grimaced at his use of the man's name, but Harry had more important things to think about than the fear it invoked.

"Why is it that I never knew of this?" he asked, looking at the woman with a frown.

"That is because you were raised in the muggle world," McGonagall explained. She had already gone into a basic description of what a muggle was, a human with non-magical abilities. The term sounded derogatory to Harry. He didn't approve of it, but didn't bring it up either. There were more important things to think about.

"And why, pray tell, was I raised in the muggle world?" he asked, both genuine curiosity and slight anger could just barely be discerned in his voice. Now that he was hearing about how famous he was, he had to wonder. Why was it that he was sent to the Dursley's? If he was so famous, then why was he not brought up in the wizarding world? If he had he would have not have been so humiliated when that mob had, well, *mobbed him*. Never in his life had he shown such weakness, never had he felt as ashamed as he did now.

"It was Professor Dumbledore's idea," McGonagall said, and Harry watched as her nostril's flared slightly. It was clear to him that she did not approve of his living with the Dursley's, which pleased him slightly, though he masked it well. Now onto the next question.

"And just why did Professor Dumbledore think it a good idea to leave me in the care of a muggle family?" Granted, those people *were* his relatives, but they knew nothing of magic. Hell, they hated magic! To them magic was unnatural, something that shouldn't exist, something that defied to laws of science. To them, anything so unusual, so freakish, was to be hated, not embraced.

"He felt that it would not be a good idea for you to grow up knowing of

your fame," McGonagall explained. "He did not want you to become egotistical, which is what would have happened if you grew up in the spotlight."

Ah, now that made sense, Harry thought. Yes, he could see why Dumbledore would want him to be raised away from his fame. People who grew up in the spotlight became ugly, pig-headed; they let their own innate sense of superiority go to their heads and became nothing more than arrogant fools who believed themselves better than everyone else simply because they were famous. In that regard at least, Dumbledore had done right.

What he had not done right in was leaving him with those people. Those magical hating fools who abused him when he was younger. Those idiots who hated him so much that for his first five years there, Harry had been subject to their abuse.

Harry felt anger, white hot anger raging through him. Anger at Dumbledore for leaving him on the doorstep of those disgusting people. Anger at the Dursley's for not being able to see past their own fickleness and hatred. But most importantly, Harry felt anger at himself, because he knew he was better than this. That he was above such petty emotions and hatreds. What was done was done, the past could not be changed, and getting angry over it would not help him move towards a better future.

Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and when he exhaled, he allowed his anger to go with it. When he opened his eyes again it was to see Professor McGonagall giving him an inquisitive and worried look. He smiled at her. "Thank you, Professor, for enlightening me about that which I was ignorant of. I have heard the saying that ignorance is a bliss." His smile turned amused. "After what has happened today, I don't think I agree."

The stern looking Professor's lips twitched. It looked like she was trying to smile, but had at some point forgotten how. "Considering what happened today, Mr. Potter, I am not sure I can blame you for that." Her somewhat smile once again became a thin line. "And now that we have that out of the way, perhaps you can tell me why you are here without a teacher?"

At this Harry shrugged. "No teacher came to my house."

"No teacher came to your house?" McGonagall parroted the question, though her tone was surprised not deadpanned like Harry's had been. "Mr. Potter, what do you mean no teacher came to your house? Though you are not muggleborn, you *are* muggle-raised. A teacher should have come to your house with your acceptance letter so they could explain your heritage and help get your school supplies at Diagon Alley."

"I don't know what to tell you, Professor," Harry raised his hands in a helpless gesture. "No teacher came to me; I only got a letter that came in through the mail. Nothing more, nothing less."

McGonagall's lips seemed to, impossibly enough, thin even more than they already had. Her hand twitched up in jerky movements, coming to rest upon her forehead, which she began to rub, as if trying to stem the tide of a coming migraine. "Albus... you foolish man," she muttered under her breath. It was soft, obviously Harry was not meant to hear it, but he heard nonetheless. There was a story there, he could tell, but decided to push onto more important things.

"Professor," he began again. McGonagall snapped out of her stress-filled musings to look at him. "Do you think it would be possible to allow me to enter Diagon Alley now." When he saw her frown at him he quickly continued. "I still need to get my school supplies, after all."

"Mr Potter, I am not sure that is a good idea." Her lips pursed as she looked at him, debating the merits of whatever thoughts were on her mind. "I have already told you the reason we have a teacher go into Diagon Alley with those who are raised in a muggle household. Perhaps it would be best if... I were to accompany you."

Harry tilted his head, considering her offer. It would prove to be most beneficial to have someone along who could show him where to get his supplies and answer his questions. He had many of those, after all. Questions, that is. At the same time, Harry was a very independent person. He did not like relying on others. If there was a question he had, he would find the answer himself. If there was something to be done, he would rather do it himself. He preferred it that way, less room for error.

"I do thank you for the offer," Harry's response was congenial, if a bit halting. "However, I think I would prefer heading on alone." Professor McGonagall opened her mouth to respond, perhaps to refute his words and demand to go with him.

Harry wouldn't give her the opportunity.

"And besides, you said it yourself; the reason you are here is to explain to muggleborn students that they can use magic and help them enter Diagon Alley." He gestured to the list sitting on the table. "That list, it contains the names of those you are supposed to meet with today, yes?"

McGonagall looked reluctant, but gave him a nod. She looked like she was about to say something again, but Harry beat her to it, giving her the smile he'd practiced a thousand times in the mirror, the same smile he gave to all of his teachers.

"I wouldn't want to ruin your schedule just because of a mix up with my letter. And I assure you, unlike most children my age, I am quite capable of handling myself." He tilted his head, lips twitching as he fought to keep his smile from turning into a grimace. "That... shameful display you saw earlier was a one-time thing brought about by surprise." The way he said display was almost like he was swallowing a poison. "It won't happen again."

McGonagall pursed her lips, and Harry could almost see what the woman was thinking. Here he was, a student, muggle-raised and without a teacher, and he was heading into Diagon Alley to pick up his school supplies. As a teacher, one who was quite obviously stern but fair, she probably prided herself on following the rules, and while Harry was not sure leaving a muggle-raised student to find their way through Diagon Alley was against any rules, it probably spat in the face of tradition—and the clearly high moral standard she set for herself. Which was likely just as bad.

At the same time, it was also clear she was in a hurry. She had just spent an hour explaining his apparent fame in the wizarding world to him, an hour which she should have used to meet her first student and begin explaining magic to them and their parents. She was already off carefully-

crafted schedule, and that likely rankled her a bit.

Time for a bit of positive reinforcement.

"I assure you, Professor, that I am quite capable." Harry gave her a confident, charming smile. "While I admit that I was raised by muggles, my Aunt did know of my heritage, so I was not completely ignorant of what to expect. I simply had not known that I was so famous. That's all."

McGonagall did not look convinced, but there really was nothing she could do. She grimaced, then said, "very well, Mr. Potter." There was a resignation in her voice. "In that case, I shall open the way to Diagon Alley."

Harry offered the woman another grateful nod and a more genuine smile. "Thank you."

Glad that his newest crises had been averted and he now had some context to put to that night ten years ago, Harry stood up and followed Professor McGonagall to the wall that would grant him entrance to Diagon Alley.

Another chapter gone by. Now, I figured I would get this out of the way so that no one can complain later on. This story is a Harry/harem, as stated in my summery if any of you bothered to read it. Harry will be with five girls, which I have already chosen, and no I will not tell you who they are. That being said, if this doesn't please you, I would like to ask that rather than complain to me, simply hit the back button and stop reading.

Anywho, for those who are still interested I hope you liked the chapter.

Chou!

The Founding Five

The Founding Five

I had finally done it! I've finally gained power! After all these months of hard work and experimentation I've been granted the power to free myself from my relatives clutches!

As I sat within the confines of my cupboard, a grin spread across my face as the small ball of light within my hands slowly flickered in and out, like the flame of a candle caught in a breeze.

Ever since I had been dumped with these people, I knew that I was different. Unique. Special. I could do things they could not. It had not taken me long to learn that this was the reason they hated me so much.

Jealousy. The lot of them were jealous that I possessed this amazing power and they did not. They had tried to beat me down so I would not realize this, but now I knew, and I would not let them walk over me like that again.

From the moment I had realized why they hated me so much, I had been practicing with these strange powers. I worked hard, all in the hopes of eventually showing my relatives that they would no longer be able to push me around, that they couldn't control me. I was glad to see it had finally paid off.

At first the only thing I could do was make small objects float; a feather, a spring, those spiders. I got very tired just keeping them in the air for a few minutes. Now I could hold them for as long as I wanted; I could even make them move! What's more, I could use that same power to push things away from me or pull them to me. I could even lift larger objects like desks—which I had tried when the Dursley's left on their family trips to the cinema and thought they had locked me in the cupboard—and now, now that I could do all this and control light. I was ready.

Finally, I would never be a doormat to the Dursley's again.

Finally, they would no longer be able to walk all over me.

Finally, I had the power.

And they had none.

XoX

It was very hard for Harry Potter to keep his eyes from widening in astonishment when he first entered Diagon Alley. His field of vision seemed to have expanded in the last second from when he had first entered the alley to now. He was very thankful that within the hustle and bustle of the crowd, no one would notice him walking out from the archway that led to the Leaky Cauldron.

Harry's eyes swept back and forth across the wizarding alley, each sight, every smell, every feeling he experienced was committed to memory. It was wondrous. Incredible. Never before had Harry ever seen anything like the place he was in now. For the first time in years, Harry felt very much like a small child getting excited over seeing something new.

Diagon Alley was, in essence, an alley. It had one main road made of a cobblestone street upon which hundreds if not thousands of witches and wizards tread daily. This road was inlaid with more roads, small branches that wove an interconnecting path. Alongside the road were large buildings that were spaced so close together there was barely any room between them. These buildings were shops, stores that sold all kinds of goods that could only be considered magical. Harry saw everything from shops selling cauldrons to shops selling a vast array of different animals such as mice, toads and owls to clothing stores whose clothing looked like something out of the fifteenth century; stores that sold potions ingredients; anything and everything he could think of that might be sold in the wizarding world seemed to be here. And Harry, his eyes moving in vast sweeps around the alley, made sure that nothing escaped his gaze. He wanted to commit everything he saw this day to memory, one he would look back on as his first steps into the wizarding world.

He looked beyond the throng of people. Far above their heads, standing in the distance was a large white building. Gringotts, the wizarding bank, and the first place Harry needed to visit.

Setting off at a brisk, yet unhurried pace, Harry Potter wove his way between the throng of marching people with ease. Like always his movements were made with a grace that was the combined gift granted to him through his eidetic memory and martial arts training. As he moved, his left hand came up, fingers brushing up against the red cloth now hiding the scar on his forehead. Now that he knew how famous he was, and what the consequences would be if anyone were to discover his identity, he'd conjured a bandana to hide his most prominent feature. His scar. It wasn't much of a disguise, he was willing to admit, but it seemed to be working, and that was all that mattered.

As Gringotts bank loomed ever closer, Harry began to realize just how imposing the building truly was. It was large, easily towering over everything else. Made of snow-white marble and at least six stories high. Long, sweeping columns were set into each story of the building, and Harry had to wonder if they were there as a support, or merely decoration. At the front of the building, cast in bold lettering above the entryway were the words Gringotts Bank.

Harry ascended the large, white stone steps and reached the set of burnished bronze doors that led into the wizarding bank. On either side of the doors were a pair of what Harry could only guess were Goblins, the race that owned the bank and governed wizarding finances. They were rather strange looking creatures, to him at least. They were short, with dark, leathery skin. They had long fingers and feet, and the one on the left had a pointed beard. Some of the more common traits, he deduced from the pair before him, was that most goblins seemed to have a long nose, equally long pointed ears, and very little hair on their heads. All this was taken in with a mere seconds glance, before Harry looked away. It was impolite to stare, after all.

He continued walking, the goblins parting the doors for him. He found himself in another room. An entrance hall, if he had to guess. On the other side of the hall was another set of doors, these ones silver.

Continuing on, Harry closed in on the doors and noticed they had words engraved on them:

Enter, stranger, but take heed

*Of what awaits the sin of greed,
For those who take, but do not earn,
Must pay most dearly in their turn.
So if you seek beneath our floors
A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware
Of finding more than treasure there.*

On either side of the door was another pair of goblins. They opened the doors, bowing as Harry made his way through.

A vast marble hall sprawled out before him as he entered the next room. Harry's sharp eyes swept through the room, his perfect memory allowing him to count the exact number of goblins roaming around. 125 of those goblins were sitting on high stools behind a long counter, scribbling on large ledgers, weighing coins with brass scales, examining precious stones through eyeglasses. 352 doors led out of the hall, more goblins could be seen coming and going from these doors, sometimes leading witches and wizards through them and sometimes not. Harry took in everything, then made his way to the closest free goblin.

"Excuse me," he called out, bringing the goblins attention to him. Harry only just reached the top of the counter, so the goblin had to tilt his head down quite a ways to see him. "My name is Harry Potter and I was told that my parents owned a vault I can withdraw gold from."

According to Professor McGonagall the Potter family was quite rich. It had been she who had first suggested he head over to the bank. She didn't go into much detail other than to tell him that he needed to go to Gringotts in order to withdraw that money.

The goblin peered down at him with a sneer on its face. Of course, it had been sneering before it even looked at Harry, so he assumed that was just its natural facial expression. The goblin's eyes flickered to his

forehead, where the bandana was still wrapped around to conceal his scar.

"Do you have a key?"

"No." Harry looked the goblin in the eyes and straightened his back. "But I was told that for the right price, one can be made for me."

The goblin paused, his brow ridges raised. Harry stared back, not allowing its intimidating countenance to bother him. After a moment, the stare down ended.

"Very well," it said, then hopped off the stool. "Follow me, Mr. Potter."

Harry followed the goblin through one of the many doors, this one leading to a long hallway. They passed along even more doors, these ones holding plaques with names on them. *Burton. Middles. Kenths*. These must be the doors that led to a family's accountant, he assumed. Soon enough, they reached the door with the word *Potter* engraved on the plaque. The goblin knocked, once, then opened the door and gestured for Harry to enter.

The room he entered appeared large and cylindrical. A bookcase bursting with scrolls and tomes sat along the wall, presumably where all the information on the Potter accounts had been stored throughout the years. In the center of the room was a large desk made out of a wood so dark it looked black. Sitting behind that desk was a goblin that looked quite a bit taller than the other ones Harry had seen so far. He was completely bald on top and had a small, pointed goatee.

As Harry walked up to the desk, the goblin looked up from his work. He took one look at Harry, then reached under his desk and slid open one of the drawers. From the drawer he produced two items, which he laid on the desk, a slip of paper and a dagger with ancient symbols Harry had never seen before drawn on it.

"Cut your finger and place three drops on the paper," the goblin instructed. Harry raised an eyebrow, but did as told. Picking up the knife and slicing his finger open without flinching, he held the open wound over the paper and squeezed three drops onto the parchment. Before

anything else could happen, the goblin snatched up the parchment and looked at it. He nodded, once, and then looked at Harry.

"Everything seems to be in order. What can I do for you, Lord Potter."

Harry frowned at the title he had been given, but didn't respond to it. While curious, this goblin was giving off an air of impatience. It would not be wise to tempt fate and make it annoyed by asking too many questions.

"I would like to check my account, as well as make a withdrawal, however, I do not have a key."

"Hmmm..."

A long, thin fingered hand reached over to a large ledger that sat on one side of the desk. The book was flipped open with a loud 'slam!' and the goblin began rifling through the pages. It would stop on a specific page, trail it's finger down, then begin flipping through more pages. Harry waited patiently, feeling it would be best not to rush the goblin in its task.

"Here we are."

The goblin flipped the book around so Harry could look at it. The page the goblin had flipped to seemed to contain the information Harry wanted, written in a neat cursive:

Harry James Potter, Heir Apparent to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter

Eligible for vaults:

Potter Family Vault upon reaching the age of majority:

6,347,234 galleons, 87 sickles, 62 knuts

Various Heirlooms

Total liquid value: 10,987,341, 119 sickles, 306 knuts

Evans Vault:

76,889 galleons, 75 sickles, 11 knuts

Items Collected from Godric's Hollow

Total Liquid Value: 80,234 galleons, 87 sickles, 14 knuts

Potter Trust Fund:

50,000 galleons to be maxed out every year for school and living expenses.

Eligible deeds for inheritance:

Potter ancestral home – Manchester – destroyed

Potter Flat – London

Potter cabin – Godric's Hollow – destroyed

Harry stared at the large number telling him how much money was in the Potter Family Vaults. He didn't know how much a galleon was worth, but a million of anything was a lot. Ten-million was probably enough for him to live in extravagance for the rest of his life and still not even make a dent in his funds.

"What's the conversion rate from galleons to pounds?" he breathed, his voice a hushed whisper.

"One galleon is four pounds ninety-seven pence, one sickle is twenty-nine pence, and one knut is one pence."

Harry ran a quick conversion in his head. The net worth of the Potter vault was over 31-million pounds. The Evans vault had a little over 400,000 pounds. While the Evans vault didn't have as much as the Potter vault comparatively, it didn't really matter. 400,000 of anything was a lot. And 31-million was beyond a lot. That kind of money was ridiculous. There was just no way anyone could have that much money on hand. It was...

"There must be some kind of mistake."

"There is no mistake, Lord Potter."

Harry's head snapped up towards the goblin. His eyes were wide, clear signs of shock. The goblin seemed to find it amusing, for he was giving

Harry a smile that showed off the sharp teeth he had.

"How...?" he croaked. "How can anyone have that much money?" The kind of money in his vault was unfathomable. It was probably enough to run a small country for at least a couple of months!

The goblin was surprisingly patient as it began giving Harry an explanation to his question. "The Potter family is very old; older even than the Ministry of Magic. They are one of only five families that are more than just Ancient and Most Noble. They, along with the Longbottoms, the Bones, the Blacks, and the Peverelles are what we call founding families, for it was they who had a hand in creating the Ministry of Magic. Some believe that these families were even alive during the time of Four Founders themselves, though that is up for debate."

"Founding families?" Harry furrowed his brow. "Ancient and Most Noble? Is that like some kind of title given to old, rich families?"

"I see you do not know much about your heritage," the goblin stated with a frown.

"It seems I know next to nothing about my heritage," Harry responded to the goblins statement a bit bitterly. Honestly, he wasn't quite sure what to think when it came to this new bit of knowledge. His parents had never mentioned their status within magical society, almost like they hadn't cared about that (knowing his dad and mum they probably didn't), and it wasn't like he could blame them since they had a psychopath coming after them and, according to Professor McGonagall, they had been in the middle of the war. Their status in the wizarding world probably hadn't mattered at the time.

Still, if his family was so important to wizarding society, then why was he sent to live with his non-magical relatives? Relatives who not only knew next to nothing of magic (beyond what little Petunia knew thanks to his mum), but also hated magic with a passion. Why not have someone who could teach him about his place within the wizarding world raise him? At the very least Dumbledore should have sent someone over to him to help teach him about magical society a year or two before he started going to Hogwarts so he would have all the necessary information to make

informed decisions that would help solidify his position among his peers. It bothered him that he, on top of being a magical celebrity who had done nothing to earn his fame, happened to belong to a family that was apparently partially responsible for creating the very government Britain's magical society was founded upon.

"Hmm..." the goblin looked at him for a few seconds, before apparently coming to some kind of decision. "Well, there is not much I can do to help you with your lack of knowledge. Even if I did have all the information you would need to know your station in life, it would take far too long to explain."

"I understand," Harry forced himself to say. He didn't like not knowing everything, especially when it came to something as monumental as this, but they had already wasted enough time and the goblin looked like he was beginning to get impatient. It was hard to tell since they all seemed to be scowling constantly. "I would like to access my vaults."

"Unfortunately," the goblin started, and Harry had to resist groaning as he realized that there was more bad news ahead. "You will not be able to enter the Potter vault until you come of age."

"So I won't be able to access the Potter vault until I'm eighteen?"

"Seventeen," the goblin corrected, and Harry raised an eyebrow in curiosity. Eighteen was the age where people were considered adults in the non-magical world. Was there a reason it was different in this one? Deciding he would find out later, Harry smoothly changed topics.

"You said nothing of the Evans Vault."

"Indeed," the goblin smirked. "As the Evans Vault was one opened by your mother, and not tied into the Potter family accounts, you are eligible to open it despite not being of age."

"Very well." Harry didn't even need to think before making a snap decision. "I would like to see the Evans Vault first, and then my Trust fund."

"Of course."

The goblin reached into another drawer and pulled out two keys, which he handed over to Harry.

"These will allow you to access the vaults in question. Griphook!" As he shouted what Harry could only assume was a name, the door to the office opened up and another Goblin walked into the room. This particular goblin looked very much like most other goblins; short, with a large nose and pointed ears. He had several skin spots on his head, which was bald at the top and had hair sweeping down near the back. Harry turned back to goblin in charge of his vaults as said creature spoke. "Griphook will lead you to your vaults."

"Follow me." The goblin turned around and walked out without waiting to see if Harry would follow him. Frowning, the young wizard took off at a brisk walk to catch up with the much shorter goblin.

He was soon led out of the hallway and into another hall that was much different from the splendor he had seen so far. The hallway itself was sloped, informing him that the vaults were underneath the surface of the bank. Granite and rock covered all sides of the hall from floor to ceiling. The floor was uneven and pocked with marks that let him know this cave was likely very old, and the only light in the dank, dark space were lit torches that were evenly spaced along the hall.

They eventually came to what looked like a cart on a railway. The cart was old, rickety and looked like it would be thrown off its hinges at the slightest provocation. Likewise, the railway seemed to travel along an erratic path that looked almost like a roller coaster of some kind. At least, the part of the railway he could see did. It was so dark in the cavernous space that he could only see maybe fifteen meters in front of him.

"Get inside of the cart please," Griphook spoke in an impatient tone. Harry got the feeling this particular goblin didn't like humans very much, or maybe he was just naturally rude. He was going to have to look up more information on goblins when he got the chance so he could understand them better.

Despite his thoughts and musings, Harry entered the cart and sat down. Griphook moved into the cart as well, standing at the front where he

pulled a lever.

There was no gradual increase, no warning. One moment the cart was at a standstill, the next it was blazing its way along the tracks at a speed that made Harry's eyes water. He did not know how fast they were going, but even to his incredibly perceptive eyes everything just seemed to be blurring by. They were going extremely fast. The only thing he could really make out were when they had passed over a large pit of flowing lava.

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Harry found himself actually enjoying the ride. It was one of his few vices, and a secret that only Lisa and her parents knew of: Harry was an adrenaline junky.

There had been a few times in the past few years where the Crawft family had gone to various amusement parks possessing a lot of roller coasters, and more often than not they had taken Harry with them.

He still remembered the very first time he had ever gone on a roller coaster before. It was one of the best times of his life, and one of the worst times of Lisa's. The girl had actually gotten quite sick, and ended up throwing up her lunch after the ride had finished. She probably would have thrown up on the ride itself, save for the fact that she had been far too busy screaming her lungs out. Harry remembered telling her that she didn't have to go on another roller coaster if she didn't want to; he had even offered not to go on anymore if it made her happy.

Of course, Lisa being Lisa had taken that as a challenge, and pretty much demanded he go on the largest and fastest roller coaster he could find. Even to this day, whenever they went to a theme park and Harry went on a ride with enough twists and turns to make a person's stomach jump into their throat, she would go on it too, even if most of the ones he enjoyed made her sick.

Really, Harry had no idea what to do with that girl.

All too soon the cart came to a screeching halt. The action was so sudden that were it not for his quick reflexes in grabbing onto the guardrail, he might have actually been thrown off. They stopped in front of an ancient looking door. It was large and round and appeared to be

composed of some kind of metal.

"Key." Griphook held out his hand and Harry put the key in it. The goblin was quick to move over to the vault, where he proceeded to lift a flap behind which the lock was hidden.

Inserting the key, Griphook twisted. There was a loud grinding noise that Harry could only presume were the locks to the door. It made him wonder just how old this vault was. Hadn't it only been opened within the past twenty or so years? The grinding noise came to a halt and was soon followed by a loud '*clang*' of locks settling into place. Green smoke billowed out of the doorway as it opened, and Griphook stepped aside to allow him entrance.

The room Harry found himself was quite extraordinary. It was a cylindrical room, fairly large, and was neatly organized. On one side was what Harry could only presume to be money; large piles of golden galleons, columns of silver sickles, and heaps of little bronze knuts. Looking at it now made Harry realize just how much money was truly in here, and it also made him wonder: if this was the amount of money in his mother's vault looked like, then what would all that money in his family vault look like?

On the other side of the room were boxes, plastic boxes to be exact. Harry was quite surprised to find non-magical containers within Gringotts. Then again, he was only assuming the containers were non-magical because so far it didn't look like the magical world had discovered the wonders of plastic yet.

There were only a few containers in any case, six in total. They were white with a black lid covering them. Nothing remarkable, at least on the outside, but whatever was on the inside could easily be considered treasure, at least to him.

"Be quick and gather what you need," Griphook said from where he stood outside of the room. "We still have another vault to travel to."

Harry frowned at the goblin's rudeness, but didn't comment as he made his way over to the boxes. Without preamble he began opening them and going through the contents. There didn't seem to be anything to remarkable, most of it was clothing, both of the male and female variety.

He did find a few small gems though, some family photos and a few picture books—the real treasures as far as he was concerned. He was quick to grab those and place them within the back pack he had taken with him this morning. After shoving the items into his bag, he was about to stand up when something else caught his attention.

It was a small case about the size of his forearm. It looked almost like a jewelery case that could be found in non-magical stores. It was black, with golden script written in elegant cursive. *Ollivanders*. With slightly shaky fingers, Harry opened the box to see what it contained.

Sitting on a plush, purple cushion was what anyone unfamiliar with the object would call a stick. It was dark brown, a little over ten inches in length, and had gently curved grooves running down its length. Despite having not seen it for a little over ten years, Harry would recognize his mother's wand anywhere.

Harry gently picked up the wand, and as he did a strange feeling came over him. He was not sure how to properly describe the feeling. Acceptance, perhaps. Love. Safety. There were many feelings that he could perceive while holding the wand. And he was not sure if the feelings he could detect were coming from him or from the wand itself. Maybe a combination of both.

Releasing a slow breath, he placed the wand back into the case and closed the lid, before stowing it in a small pouch near the front of his backpack.

He looked around the vault one more time, before determining that he was done. Walking out of the vault, Harry stopped in front of Griphook, who looked to have been waiting for him impatiently.

"I'm done here now," he said softly. He looked back into the vault one last time as it closed, then got into the cart that would take him to his trust vault.

Here we are. I'm sure you've all noticed the changes in this chapter form my previous story. Let me know if you think they are better or worse.

A Shopping Trip to Remember

Shopping

It was during one of the times Vernon drove Dudley and I home from school when I first saw the sign for a place that taught martial arts.

Like most boys my age, I had a fascination with the idea of learning to fight like Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee. I could probably blame all those fighting movies Dudley loved to watch so much, but for a while now, I had wanted to learn to fight with more than just my magic.

And so I decided that I was going to learn martial arts... one way or another.

"Absolutely not! I refuse to have you learn anything else that can be used to hurt my family! You've already done enough with those freakishly unnatural powers of yours! I won't allow you to learn how to fight!"

Naturally, Vernon did not want me learning hand-to-hand combat.

"You seem to think I was giving you a choice." I smiled, amused that this fat fool actually thought he had any say in what I could and could not do.

"What was that?" Vernon's face turned a rather unsightly shade of puce. On his walrus-like face, it was awfully disgusting.

"I was not asking you to let me learn martial arts," I continued, watching as Vernon began to tremble. The man never could keep his temper down. "I was telling you that I am going to be learning martial arts. You have no choice in the matter."

Vernon unleashed a beastly roar as he charged me, his hands coming up and making grasping motions. I got the feeling he was hoping those hands would be wrapped around my neck.

Not that it mattered. I would never give him the chance to get close

enough.

"Vernon!"

Lifting a single hand, I called upon my power. Seconds later, Vernon was hurled not just into, but straight through the wall as I used my ability and "pushed" him away.

Smiling, I walked up to the hole my fat uncle had made and saw the man lying there, groaning in pain. Standing over him was a worried looking Petunia and their obese son, Dudley.

"Look at what you did to my husband, you nasty little freak!" The woman screeched at me. I gave her a smile.

It was not a pleasant smile.

Seconds later the woman found herself on the floor, gasping as I created a vacuum in which no oxygen existed around her head. I had gotten the idea from a movie I watched once. It was a rather ingenious idea, I had to admit.

Thank you, Darth Vader, for giving me this wonderful idea.

"Do you have a problem with the way I do things, Petunia?" I asked the woman as she clutched at her throat, her eyes wider than dish pans, face turning purple from lack of oxygen. She stared at me in horror as I smiled down at her. I could practically smell her fear. It was intoxicating.

"Oi!" Dudley stood up with clenched fists. "What are you doing to mum?!"

"You're not very quick on the uptake, are you?" I allowed amusement to seep into my voice. This boy was the very definition of stupidity. Where I received the highest marks in my class, Dudley had nearly failed his. Primates were smarter than he was.

"Are you making fun of me!?" It took him a second to come to this conclusion. I was frankly just surprised he had come to it at all.

Not that I would allow this to ruin my fun.

"Yes, Dudley." I turned my smile in his direction as I finally let Petunia—whose face had turned a motley shade of red—go. "I am making fun of you. You're a stupid, idiotic child. I've seen monkeys at the zoo who are smarter than you are."

"That does it! I'll show you!"

I watched Dudley charge me the same time Petunia's eyes widened and her face paled.

My smile widened as I raised my hand.

"Dudley don't!"

Too late. With a burst of my power, Dudley was sent flying into the kitchen where he ended up smacking his head on the stove.

Petunia tried to run to her son, but with some more power, I had her floating in the air, hovering there and looking like a fish out of water. It was funny to watch her flap about.

"Dudley! Dudley! Let me go...! I need to get to my Diddykins!"

"I'm afraid I can't let you go," I told the woman. "You see, your husband isn't letting me go to my martial arts lessons, so letting you go to your son is just out of the question." I watched Petunia paled and just barely hid my grin as I tapped a finger against my chin. "But, maybe if you convince Vernon to let me learn martial arts, I'll let you go to your son."

"Yes! Yes! Whatever you want! Please, just let me go!"

Without much ceremony, I dropped the woman on the ground. A chuckle escaped my lips as the horse-like woman scrambled towards her son and began to frantically call his name to no effect. I would later learn that Dudley received a concussion.

The thought honestly didn't bother me all that much. This would serve as a good lesson to them about what would happen whenever they didn't listen to me.

XoX

It was nearly two hours after Harry had first entered Gringotts that he found himself standing outside of its doors once more. The sunlight hit his face, forcing him to squint due to how much time he'd spent in the darkened passageways where his vaults were held.

Taking out the Hogwarts letter from within his back pack, Harry pulled out and unfolded the second piece of paper that he had found attached to the first. It was a list of all the things he was required to buy for Hogwarts:

HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY

UNIFORM

First-year students will require:

- 1. Three sets of plain work robes (black)*
- 2. One plain pointed hat (black) for day wear*
- 3. One pair of protective gloves (dragon hide or similar)*
- 4. One winter cloak (black, silver fastenings)*

Please note that all pupils' clothes should carry name tags

COURSE BOOKS

All students should have a copy of each of the following:

The Standard Book of Spells (Grade 1) by Miranda Goshawk

A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot

Magical Theory by Adalbert Waffling

A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration by Emeti Switch

One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical Drafts and Potions by Arsenius Jigger

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them by Newt Scamander

The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection by Quentin Trimble

OTHER EQUIPMENT

wand cauldron (pewter, standard size 2) set

glass or crystal phials

telescope set

brass scales

Students may also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad

**PARENTS ARE REMINDED THAT FIRST YEARS ARE NOT ALLOWED
THEIR OWN BROOMSTICKS**

Harry frowned as he looked at the list. He turned his head to look at the back pack on his back, then back at the list. There was no way he would be able to fit all of that in his back pack, it was nowhere near large enough.

Blowing out a soft breath, Harry decided that the first thing he would need was a trunk to carry everything in. Fortunately for him, he had seen a place that sold trunks on the way to Gringotts.

XoX

Harry Potter entered the shop known as *Truckle's Trunks*, and took a look around the basic looking shop. Well, he assumed it was a basic looking shop for a magical store selling trunks. It was quite a bit larger on the inside than the outside, at least a dozen square meters, something that Harry picked up on immediately. There were several isles, and each one contained rows upon rows of various trunks of all shapes, sizes and colors. Some of them were floating, a few were opening and closing. Harry even saw one that looked like it was undulating.

Shaking his head at the unusual sight, and bothered that he couldn't for the life of him figure out how something such as a trunk could undulate, he made his way to the desk where a middle aged man was sitting behind a cash register.

"Excuse me," Harry called out in a confident voice. The man with slightly graying hair looked down at him, blinking. Harry ignored the inquisitive and slightly incredulous stare and continued. "I'm looking for a trunk."

"Well you've come to the right place," the man said with a smile. "You are a Hogwarts student, yes? A first year?"

"That's right," Harry admitted with a nod.

"All of our standard trunks cost fifty galleons, if you want them to be made with something other than leather you will need to specify what you want it made from."

Harry frowned as he noticed the wording the man used, and decided to question the clerk on it. "What do you mean standard? What other kinds of trunks are there?"

"We have trunks of all kinds and with all sorts of enchantments," the man exclaimed, his smile, if possible, getting larger. "Anything you could think of, we likely have it. Perhaps I can interest you in one of our seven compartment trunks made from dragon-hide and with enough expansion charms on them to make each compartment the size of a small apartment?"

Harry tilted his head quizzically at some of the unfamiliar terms the man had just bandied about. Dragon-hide was easy enough to figure out, though the thought that dragons were actually real caused his mind to whirl. However, both the term 'expansion charms' and 'seven compartments' gave him pause. After a bit of thought, he determined that an expansion charm likely did exactly as it sounded, which would also explain why this store looked larger on the inside than it did the outside. He did have a bit of trouble figuring out what seven compartments meant, but figured there must be some kind of spell that allowed one trunk to contain more than one space for his materials. He didn't know how such a thing was possible, but vowed to find out.

"I was actually thinking of getting a custom made trunk," Harry told the man, interrupting the older male's sales pitch.

"A custom, eh?" the man's eyes lit up a bit, and Harry could detect the greed in them. Custom trunks must be expensive, he mused. It almost made him wonder why this man assumed Harry could actually afford the trunk when he was so young, but chalked it off to the man probably just assuming he was an heir of a well to do family or some such. "Well, what exactly are you looking for?"

Harry was silent for a moment as he tried to decide what he wanted. Truthfully, he had at first only been planning on getting a normal trunk. But with the knowledge that he could get a trunk capable of storing vast amounts of items, decided that he might as well get the best. He had more than enough money, after all.

"I would like a four compartment trunk. What sizes do your compartments come in?"

"We have three sizes, standard, that is to say, the average size one would expect from a trunk with no magical enchantments. Our next size is what we call closet sized, which is about the size of a walk in closet. And finally, we have our largest size, which is about the size of an average bedroom."

Biting his lower lip for a moment, Harry pondered which size he should get. He didn't want the standard, as he would not be able to carry very much in them, and considering where he was going and what he would be doing, one never knew what sorts of interesting items he might pick up. That left closet size and apartment size. A part of him wanted to go for the largest size, but having four compartments the size of a bedroom seemed a little excessive, not to mention it was probably pricy, and while he didn't have any shortage of money, he had never been what one would call wasteful.

"I'll go with the closet size for all four compartments," Harry decided. He doubted he would need to something bigger, and on the off chance that he ever needed a trunk with a larger compartment, he could just come back and buy another trunk, he reasoned.

"Very well, and what would you like your trunk to be made of?"

A pause. Harry tilted his head, considering.

"What are my options?"

"Well," the man started, rubbing his hands together in undisguised glee. "We have all the normal materials, leather, wood and such, but we also have several types of dragon-hide available as well, including Hungarian Horntail, Norwegian Ridgeback, Hebridean Black, and Ukrainian Ironbelly."

"And what are the benefits to using dragon-hide over normal materials?"

"All dragon-hides are magic resistant. You can cast just about any spell at them short of a dark curse and they won't even receive a scratch. Dragon-hide is also much tougher than normal materials, strong as steel in some cases, such as with the Ukrainian Ironbelly. Course, the hide of a Ukrainian Ironbelly is much heavier than anything else, so it's a trade off."

"Then why don't we go with a happy medium? I want something durable, but not something that's too heavy for me to lift."

"In that case, why don't we go with the dragon-hide of a Norwegian Ridgeback?" the man suggested. "Their hides are more durable than the Hebridean Black's and the Horntails, but not nearly as heavy as either of them. Definitely one of the better choices, I believe."

Harry thought for a moment, before nodding. "Very well, we'll go with that. Now what about security?"

"Security?" the shop keeper blinked, confused.

"Yes," Harry replied. "I don't want people trying to get into my trunk without permission."

"Ah, well, all our trunks come standard with a magical lock," the man answered. "It requires you to speak a password in order to open."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Are there no other options available?"

"None, I'm afraid," the man shifted uncomfortably.

"Very well," Harry sighed, he had been hoping for something a bit more secure, like a lock that could only be opened with his own blood, or something of the sort. But if he had no other option then that's what he would go with, at least until he could create his own security. "I believe that will suffice. Now all we need to discuss is the cost and how long it will take for my trunk to be made."

"You're in luck," the man replied, grabbing the wand from the desk and making a swish and flick motion. Harry watched as a trunk made of a brown material that looked like leathery scales floated over to them. It set down directly in front of Harry, and the older male set his wand back onto the desk. "I already have a trunk with the exact specifications you are looking for."

Well, that was convenient, though Harry assumed the man likely had many such trunks that were pre-made to fit exact specifications so anyone looking to buy a custom made trunk wouldn't have to wait.

"The trunk will cost one-thousand galleons," the man told him. Harry raised an eyebrow at the price, noticing just how much more expensive getting a custom made trunk was from getting a standard trunk. This made him realize that it was highly unlikely that anyone except for maybe himself, and a few of the children from an Ancient and Most Noble family would have something like this. Still, he had more than enough money, and it wasn't like he had no intention of not using his trunk to its fullest.

Reaching into his back pack, he pulled out the pouch inside of it that had been magically expanded to carry more money than he could possible carry on hand. He gave the man 1,000-galleons, a not insignificant sum but not enough to even put a dent into the amount he had, and left with his new trunk in tow.

"Have a great day," the man said, waving at Harry as he left the shop.

XoX

It would not be a surprise to anyone who knew Harry that his first stop after receiving his trunk was the book store, *Flourish and Blotts*. Those

who knew him knew that Harry had an insatiable desire to learn. Lisa had said it best when she had once commented that he was practically married to his books after he'd spent an entire day at the library reading.

Flourish and Blotts was a lot different than any other book store or library he had ever been in. Like the trunk store this one also appeared much larger on the inside than it was on the outside, it looked to be around two or three times the size of the trunk store. All around the shop Harry could see rows upon rows of books. It looked like the books were organized categorically by subject. Charms. Transfiguration. Defense Against the Dark Arts and so on. Harry did not recognize any of those categories, but he expected that. While his parents had told them much about Hogwarts when he was a baby, most of it had to do with pranks and certain teachers. They had never really gone into great detail of the classes or subjects taught there.

This did not deter Harry, not in the least. The first thing Harry did was go through the store and search out the required books for his subject. They weren't that difficult to find, but after finding the books needed for school as required by the Hogwarts curriculum for first years, Harry discovered that he didn't know what else to buy. Granted, a part of him just wanted to buy every single book this store had, but he figured it would be better if he started out by getting books that would be relevant to learning what he would need to know about the wizarding world.

Therein lay the problem. Harry knew very little about the world of magic. In fact, aside from the bits he was told by his aunt and Professor McGonagall, he knew next to nothing.

He supposed it would be good to buy a few history books first. His knowledge of all that happened within the past century was lacking, and he needed to get caught up to speed with the current times.

He already had *A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot. Chances were good he would be finished reading that one before he got to Hogwarts. He also managed to find *Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century*, *Notable Magical Names of Our Time*, both of which would help him learn about the most prominent figures in the wizarding world. This would definitely be beneficial as it was always important to know who's who no

matter which society you were living in.

Another book he found was *Nature's Nobility: A Wizarding Genealogy*, which listed all of the pureblood family lines, or so Harry believed. It was only after a quick scan of the first few pages that he realized it only listed lines that had gone extinct. Still, he figured it would prove useful and took it anyway.

More books included *Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts*, *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*, *Modern Magical History*, and *A Study in Recent Developments in Wizardry*. All of the books looked like they would prove useful in letting him learn the most recent history of the magical world. He only hoped they would be enough as their didn't seem to be much else that would provide the information he wanted.

It was as Harry was going through the isles searching for any more history books that he found something which both intrigued and bothered him. Inside of the History section of Flourish and Blotts was an entire section dedicated to him. Harry saw books with titles such as *Harry Potter and the Egyptian Black Dragon*, *Harry Potter and the Warlock's Spell*, *Harry Potter and the Trip Through Time*, and sixteen other books with similar titles.

Harry was not sure what disturbed him more: the fact that people were writing books about him, or the fact that there was an animated toy that looked nothing like him save for the scar on its head that came complimentary when you bought one of the books.

Picking up the one titled *Harry Potter and the Banshee's Breath*, the person who the book was written about opened it up to the first page and began to read.

What he saw didn't just disturb him. It angered him. This book was apparently a story book about him traveling through Ireland. He didn't even need to read more than the first page to know that the book was about him supposedly defeating this 'banshee', and it didn't take a large leap in logic to realize that all of the other books were about similar adventures he'd supposedly had. Harry did not know if the people who had written this truly thought he had accomplished these things, but one

thing he did know was that this blatant use of his name without even getting his permission to use it caused a wellspring of black rage to surge up into his soul.

The book shelf began to shake. Realizing he was close to blowing his lid, Harry closed his eyes and began to empty his mind. It would not do for him to blow up the shelves containing his books in a fit of rage. Not only would it cause questions to be asked—and more then likely get him kicked out of the store—but he didn't need to draw that kind of attention to himself.

He focused on his breathing while imagining his mind as a blank space, a void of white. He breathed in through the nose, held it for five seconds, then out through the mouth. The process repeated several times before he felt sufficiently calm. That still didn't stop him from glaring at the books the moment his eyes were opened, but at least he could think without wanting to blow the books to kingdom come.

Without hesitation he grabbed a copy of every single book on the shelf and put it into his basket. It was as he finished putting the last book, *Harry Potter and the Wandering Vampire*, into the basket that he realized another problem. His basket was beginning to get too heavy for him to carry, and that was not even considering how he was lugging around his new trunk behind him. At this rate he would not be able to get even half of the books he wanted.

It only took him a moment to think of a way out of this predicament however, and the moment he did Harry set off towards one of the people who looked like they worked there: a young female that Harry guessed was in her late teens. She was quite attractive, with dark black hair pulled into a bun and a few stray strands framing a heart-shaped face. Green eyes were complimented by the green robes she was wearing. The reason he could tell she worked there was because she wore an apron with *Flourish and Blotts* written on it in gold lettering.

"Excuse me." Harry came up behind the girl and tapped her on the shoulder. Despite being above average in height for a kid his age, this girl was a head and shoulder taller than him, and when she turned around the young woman blinked in surprise, before tilting her head down to look

at him. Casting the female worker a charming smile he said, "I was wondering if you could help me with something."

The girl returned his smile with one of her. "Of course, what do you need help with?"

"I was gathering some books that I thought looked interesting and felt would help me learn more about the wizarding world," Harry began his explanation without any further prompting. "I'm muggle-raised, you see, so I don't know much about the wizarding world and was hoping to learn as much as I could before going to Hogwarts."

"You're a first year then?" asked the girl, blinking a bit in surprise. She looked him up and down once more. He noticed that she looked at his bandana, which he knew seemed out of place, but ignored that since she didn't ask him any questions about it. "I thought you were at least a second or third year with how tall you are."

"Ah, well, I'm a bit tall for my age," Harry admitted with a shrug, before plunging on with his request. "Anyway, while I was gathering books I realized that my basket was getting too heavy for me to carry, and at this rate I won't be able to buy all the books I want. I was wondering if you knew of something that could help me with this problem, and maybe answer a few questions so I can find out what books I still need."

"I think I can do that," the girl said. She then looked at the large trunk he was dragging behind him. "The first thing we need to do is get rid of that trunk. You won't be able to carry all your books if you're too busy lugging that thing around."

Harry frowned. "Where should I put it?"

"Why don't you take it to the Professor showing you around so they can look after it?"

"Actually, I'm here on my own," Harry corrected. Upon seeing the look of surprise on her face he hastily added, "the person I live with, my aunt, knows about magic so I guess they felt I didn't need a professor guiding me. It's just that because she's a muggle I wasn't able to take her to Diagon Alley with me." Harry honestly wasn't sure if it was possible for a

muggle to enter the Leaky Cauldron or not. Uncle Vernon hadn't even seen it, so he assumed that was the case. He only hoped he was right.

"Oh." The girl frowned a bit, before shrugging. "I guess that makes sense, sort of. I wouldn't know since I'm a half-blood myself and both my parents were magical. My mum's muggleborn."

"Same here," Harry said with a smile, before frowning. "So about the trunk..."

"We'll just place it behind the counter for now," the girl told him. She pulled what Harry recognized as a wand out of the folds of her robes, and he watched as she made a 'swish and flick' motion. "Wingardium Leviosa."

"Is that one of the spells we learn at Hogwarts?" Harry asked curiously. It was basically like his levitation magic, only with a wand instead.

"Yes, it is," the girl looked at him, slightly confused. Harry assumed it was because he had told her he was muggle-raised, yet wasn't surprised or awed to see her using magic. Then again, it could be something else entirely, though he doubted it. "This is actually a first year spell, the Levitation Charm."

"Neat," said Harry, looking over the spell curiously. He glanced at the girl's wand and noted it was pointed at the trunk. Did that mean that in order to maintain the spell she had to keep it locked onto the trunk at all times? Or perhaps she used her wand to direct where the spell went. How interesting. While it looked slightly limited at first, Harry could see how that would be useful. He could only control where the objects he floated moved by giving them a preset destination, or giving them a loop to follow. That was part of the reason he made them orbit his head. He could only make them travel in a circle, or straight one way. Changing direction or animating something required him to exert both more control and more magic, which made it more difficult.

The girl looked at him oddly, but quickly shook off whatever she was thinking and led him down to the counter, where she set his trunk. What followed next was Harry telling the girl what he was looking for in the books he wanted as the two of them traveled the bookstore collecting

books.

In the end, Harry ended up getting a large number of books on wizarding laws, including but not limited to *The Dark Arts: A Legal Companion*, *The Dark Arts – A Legal Compendium*, *Legal Guide to Proper Use of Magic*, *Magical Misdemeanors in the Modern Law*, *Magical Moral Perspective*, *Unforgivable Curses and their Legal Compunctions*. It was his hope that these books would help him not only know what the laws were, but also find legal loopholes to use if he ever needed to break them.

He was a bit disappointed to learn that there were no books on etiquette and how one was supposed to act in formal functions within the Wizarding World. When asked, the girl giving him a hand had told him, "sorry, but as far as I know there aren't any books on things like that. From what I understand learning etiquette and whatnot is learned through word of mouth. However, we do have a book on wizarding traditions." That particular conversation had ended up with him getting the book *A Traditional Look at Wizarding Traditions*. He only hoped it would be enough until he found someone who could teach him how to act in wizarding society.

Books on law and tradition were not the only books he ended up buying that day. He also ended up getting more books on subjects taught at Hogwarts such as Herbology, Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions and Transfiguration, which Harry learned through the pretty girl helping him was actually what his Transformation magic was called. He also bought several books on subjects that were not taught at Hogwarts, subjects like Defensive and Offensive spells, Dueling, General Spellbooks, Alchemy, Goblins and a few books on Magical Theory. All in all Harry felt that he had made a pretty good haul.

"I'm not sure how you plan on fitting all this in your trunk," the shop assistant half-joked after they had finished their excursion for the books he was looking for. Of course, she was half joking because there was simply no way Harry would be able to fit all of those books in a normal trunk.

"My parents left me a lot of money," Harry said with a shrug. "So I ended up buying a custom trunk to store books and other things I felt I would

need."

"Oh..." the girl shifted uncomfortably at that reminder. Harry had told her he was muggle-raised, which meant he had been unable to be raised by his parents for whatever reason. In this day and age that was not uncommon due to Voldemort's purging of many magical families that had opposed him. There were a large number of orphans in Britain due to the few families that had children that had managed escaped the Dark Lords wrath. She probably, and correctly, assumed that he was one such orphan. "Well, why don't I just ring you up then."

The total cost for all the books Harry decided to get came to a grand total of five-hundred galleons. Not nearly as pricy as his trunk, but still expensive. Still, the money he had used was money well spent in his opinion. Knowledge was power, and right now he had a distinct lack of it as far as the wizarding world was concerned.

"Thank you very much," Harry gave his appreciation to the girl who had helped him with a slight bow of his head. He did not like asking for help often, but when he did he was more than willing to show how grateful he was for the help. It was important to let people know you appreciated what they did for you. Building bridges is what he believed it was called. "I don't believe I ever got your name miss..."

"Well aren't you a little gentlemen," the girl said with a smile. "My name is Cassidy Fergand."

"Cassidy," Harry tested the name before offering the girl a smile. "Thank you for the help. I won't forget it." And unlike other people, Harry really wouldn't forget it. He also wasn't one to just let this go. He was indebted to this girl for helping him, even if she was only doing it because she was paid to, she had gone far beyond what her job called for—spending what had to be at least two or three hours helping him—and he would be sure to pay her back some day.

Offering one last wave to Cassidy, and getting a 'thank you and please come again' from said girl, Harry, lugging his trunk behind him, left the store.

Not much to say about this chapter. Let me know what you think.

Familiar Familiars and Getting Fitted

Chapter 6: Familiar Familiars

Two months. I've wasted two months at this stupid dojo. Two months of not learning martial arts. Two months of my instructor telling me that he would not teach me until I was ready.

Two months of time. Wasted.

"You are full of much anger for one so young," my master, Wei, said, observing me through squinted eyes.

"I'm angry because you won't teach me anything!" I shouted at him, balling my hands into fists. "I've been here for two months now but all we've done so far is stretches and push-ups! I want to learn how to fight! I need to learn how to fight!"

"Why do you need to know how to fight?" he inquired.

"So my relatives can no longer walk all over me. So I can prove to them that I'm better than they are. So that I won't ever have to put up with their abuse again!" By the end of my rant, I felt out of breath.

"Is that really why you wish to learn now?" Master Wei asked.

"Of course, why else would I want to learn?"

Master Wei looked at me. He said nothing, spoke no words; he just stared.

I turned away, uncomfortable.

"I think you know the real reason you wish to learn martial arts," Master Wei said quietly. "However, until you can admit to the real reason, I will not teach you how to fight. Martial Arts is not just a way of fighting, but an art and an oath. It is an art that allows one to express themselves through movement, and an oath to never use violence unless it is the only way to

protect yourself or the ones you love. Now then, I believe we are done for the day. Go wash up and head home. We shall continue where we left off tomorrow."

I glared at my master, wanting nothing more than to lift him with my magic and throw him through a wall. But I couldn't do that, could I? Mum once said there were laws about using magic in front of non-magical people. I didn't know how they could find out what I'd done, but they must have some means of tracking magic—or so I assumed.

And so I left, impotent, angry and frustrated beyond belief, my heart blackened with rage.

XoX

Upon exiting *Flourish and Blotts*, Harry noticed right away that the sun was much higher in the sky than it had been before entering the bookstore. He must have spent at least two hours within that shop. Harry was very glad he had gotten here so early, or he might have had to leave before he even managed to buy all of his school supplies.

Using the positioning of the sun to judge the time, Harry deduced that it was somewhere around midday. In other words, it was high time he grabbed a bite to eat.

Fortunately, there were a number of places where he could find a decent meal at. Harry had seen five different cafe's from while walking to Gringotts. He began moving toward one that caught his fancy when he paused, a small frown flitting across his face as he looked around for the source of his apprehension.

Something was calling him. It wasn't a voice calling out his name, or even a voice in his head calling out to him. It felt more like an innate feeling that something here wanted to get his attention, a tug on his heart that pulled him in a certain direction. Not one to ignore such a feeling, and extremely curious to find out what was calling him, Harry abruptly changed directions and walked away from the cafe he had been about to walk into and towards the source of this strange sensation.

The source that was calling out to him was none other than *Eeylops Owl*

Emporium. The store was very dark on the inside, probably due to the fact that owls were nocturnal creature's. Harry's vision took several moments to adjust, but when he did it was easy to see that the store was really just an open space with no shelves, one counter, and a whole lot of cages containing Owls of all kinds hanging from the rafters.

Many of the owls were of kinds that Harry recognized: Barn, Brown, Tawny, Screech, yet none of those were the ones Harry had sensed calling to him.

"Can I help you, kid?"

Harry almost jerked in surprise. With all the hooting from the Owls in the shop, he hadn't heard the man walking up behind him. Looking over at who he could only guess was the shop keeper, Harry took in the man's general appearance; tall, with brown going on gray hair and a pot belly. He wore the standard black wizarding robes that had several feather's sticking to it, which gave him a bit of an unruly look.

"Maybe," Harry replied, keeping his surprise well hidden. "I'm looking for... an Owl."

The man raised an eyebrow at his pause, but then seemed to shrug off whatever he was thinking. "If it's an owl you're looking for, you've come to the right place. Eeylops is the number one store for getting a pet Owl. What kind are you looking for?"

"I'm... not sure," Harry said, his eyes once more traveling around the store as he tried to find the source of whatever was calling him. "But I'll know when I see her."

"Her?" the man questioned with a raised eyebrow. Harry ignored him as he traveled deeper into the store, searching. He passed by many owls, all of them hooting as they twisted their heads this way and that. Harry was vaguely amused when he watched one owl twist it's head 180-degrees, reminding him of the movie *The Exorcist* that Lisa had convinced him to watch when she snuck into her parents R-rated movie cabinet.

He also remembered how the girl hadn't been able to sleep in her own bed for several weeks after that and often crawled into his when he spent

the night.

It happened when Harry finally reached the back, the moment he discovered the source calling to him: a snowy white owl with the most intelligent amber eyes he had ever seen on something that was not human. She watched him with the utmost concentration from within her cage, glowing eyes that followed his every move.

Harry found himself almost entranced as he walked up to the owl. Visions flitted through his mind. Images. Sensations. He couldn't make heads or tails of them, but knew they came from the white owl. He didn't know how he knew this, just that he did.

"You won't be wanting that bird," the shop keeper following him said, but Harry hardly listened to him. It was as if the man's voice was coming to him from a great distance, like a fading echo spoke from miles away. "A right menace, she is. Many customers tried buying her only to be bitten. I would've gotten rid of her a long time ago, but she never moves from that cage even when I open it to let her free."

"Really, how interesting," Harry mused absently as he and the owl stared at each other. There was something about this owl, a thrum of familiarity that hummed within his soul. It was strange, he had never laid eyes on this owl until now, and yet he felt as if he should know her. Almost like she was simply a piece of him that he had been missing.

Raising his left hand, Harry ignored the shop keepers warnings as he stuck fingers in between the cage. The owl eyed his index finger with a look of keen intelligence. After a moment she lightly nipped his finger, then waddled a bit closer to the cage so that Harry could brush his fingers against her feathers.

"Well I'll be," the shop keeper said in surprise. "Every other person whose done what you have got their fingers practically bitten off."

"I'm sure they have," Harry replied in a soft voice. He could feel it, he didn't know why, he didn't know how, but he knew that this owl belonged with him. They were partners, in a sense, even if he was not quite sure just what that partnership entailed. "How much for her?"

The man eyed the bird and the boy strangely, before shrugging. "Fifty Galleons. That includes both the cage and owl treats."

"We won't need either of those," Harry said, his voice still soft. Neither he nor the Owl had looked away from each other since the moment they had made eye contact. He didn't why, but Harry felt that if they broke contact something bad would happen. He didn't know what, it was just a gut feeling. But it was one he decided to go with since he always trusted his instincts.

The shop keeper looked a bit unnerved, probably thinking about how weird the strange owl and even stranger kid were, but he didn't argue the point. "Very well, then it will twenty-five galleons for the owl."

Harry absently opened his money pouch and pulled out exactly twenty-five galleons, then handed it to the shop keeper. All of this was done while still keeping eye contact with the owl. As soon as the man had his money, Harry opened the cage that kept him and his new partner separated.

Immediately the owl flew out of the cage, startling the shop keeper who let out a loud shout of surprise. She flew around the room for two laps, and then landed on Harry's outstretched arm. The Owl nipped him on the ear once in a gesture that Harry got the feeling was distinctly affectionate, and Harry decided it was time to leave and get something to eat.

He left the shop, only vaguely paying attention to the shop keeper who complained about the weird bird and the even weirder kid who bought her.

XoX

Lunch time found Harry sitting in a small batch of tables near a cafe, eating a beef sandwich as he read *A History of Magic*. If he were perfectly honest, he was rather surprised Diagon Alley actually had what amounted to an open air cafe, especially when he considered how behind the times the magical world seemed to be. Judging from everything he had seen and done, Harry had determined that the wizarding world was still stuck somewhere in the early or late fifteen hundreds, long before the open air cafe was invented.

Still, he supposed some things had to change, what with all of the muggleborn students that come out of Hogwarts. And even though Diagon Alley had an open air cafe, it still looked like something that was pulled directly from the fifteenth Century.

"You know," Harry said conversationally to the owl currently standing on the table eating a small plate of bacon he had gotten for her. "We still need to come up with a name for you."

The Owl looked up from her eating, her head tilting this way and that. She gave a barking hoot that Harry somehow translated into assent, before going back to her crispy pieces of pig.

"How about Alison?" asked Harry. His new owl companion only took enough time from her eating to give him a look that, if he had to define with a word, believed 'unsatisfied' would be the most apt fit. She hooted in a manner that told him a similar story to her expression, and then went back to eating. Harry decided to cross off that name as a no in his mental list.

"What about Katherine?"

"Hoot!"

"Angelica?"

"Hoot!"

"Ok, ok, how about Tabitha?"

When 'Tabitha' decided to show her displeasure at the name by biting his hand hard enough to draw blood and a pained hiss from him, Harry said, "ok, so not Tabitha."

Of course, that meant he still hadn't come up with a decent name for the owl. There were many more names out there that he knew of, but he suspected his Owl did not want a typical name. He didn't know *how* he knew, just that he knew she would want a name that was not only rare, but also unique.

Frowning, Harry looked down at the book, *A History of Magic*. It was a very fascinating book, a well-spring of knowledge on events long since past. A part of him knew that he should probably be reading something a bit more prevalent to his current situation and lack of knowledge on recent events, but he had reasoned with himself that he would be studying almost nonstop for the next few weeks before he went to school. It generally only took him a day or two to read most books, even the larger textbooks only took at most three days. That would be more than enough ample time to gain all of the important knowledge he would need before beginning his first year at Hogwarts.

As he looked at the book set on the table, his mind recalled a particular name that had appeared within the third page of the book.

"How about Hedwig?" Harry asked, looking up at the Owl, who had stopped her eating again to look at him. She blinked several times, her head tilting to the left and then the right. A moment past, then two. Harry began to wonder if she would ever answer him, but after another moment she gave what he could only describe as an 'affirming' hoot, bobbed her head up and down once, then went back to eating.

Harry smiled. It seems he finally found a name for his new companion.

Chapter 7: Clothes and Wands

The next shop on Harry's list of places to go was none other than *Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions*. There, he got his first sight of who could only be the own of the store, Madam Malkin. She was a rather squat witch, dressed in a mauve robe, and giving him a pleasant smile. While she looked a little odd in Harry's opinion, being so short and all, he couldn't help but decide he liked this woman's cheerful demeanor. And, if nothing else, at least she took better care of her appearance than those other witches he had seen in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Hogwarts, dear?" asked the woman, her kind smile still in place.

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"We've had quite a few Hogwarts students coming in today," Madam Malkin said. "In fact, there's a young lady being fitted up just now."

In the back of the shop, a young girl with slightly curly brown hair tied in a pony-tail, bright brown eyes, and a pretty smile stood on a footstool, while a second witch pinned up her long black robes. Madam Malkin directed Harry onto the stool next to the girl, slipped a long robe over his head, and began to pin it to the right length.

"Hi!" The girl greeted him in a voice that was every bit as cheerful as her smile. "Are you going to Hogwarts too?"

"That's right," Harry told her with a smile of his own, his mind and demeanor easily slipping into that of the polite and helpful boy he acted like whenever he was at school. "From how excited you are I take it you're a first year as well?"

"That's right," the girl said with a nod. "What year are you in?"

"First year."

"Really?" The girl looked at him wide-eyed. She eyed him up and down, and as she did, her cheeks gained a bit of color. Harry frowned when he saw her staring at him, it almost looked like she was eying him through the robe. "You don't look like a first year," she mumbled to herself.

"I get that a lot," Harry admitted, and the mild blush that had been staining the girl's cheeks spread to the rest of her face, as she realized she had not only been caught staring at him, but also hadn't been as quiet as she should have been.

The frown marring Harry's face deepened for a moment as he wondered why the girl seemed so embarrassed. It's not like she hadn't said anything he had never heard before. Or maybe it had something to do with how she'd been caught staring at him?

Well, whatever. It wasn't like it really mattered in the end. Shrugging the thought off as irrelevant, Harry decided to restart the conversation by steering it toward the one thing they had in common. The new school they would both soon be going to.

"Are you excited to be going to Hogwarts?"

"You bet I am!" the girl replied, enthused, her bright smile returning again. It was almost amusing how she seemed to bounce from embarrassed to excited so quickly, a thought Harry wisely kept to himself. "So what house do you think you'll be in?"

"I'm not sure," Harry admitted, almost tempted to shrug, but held himself back for fear of accidentally getting stuck with a needle while Madam Malkin was fitting his robes. "Both of my parents were in Gryffindor, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's where I'll end up. I suppose I will go to whichever house they put me in."

"So both of your parents went to Hogwarts?" the girl asked. Not giving him a chance to respond, she said, "mine too. My mum was in Ravenclaw and my dad was in Slytherin." She paused for a moment, then asked, "are you a pureblood then?"

"Half-blood," Harry corrected her. "My mum was a muggleborn while my father was pureblood."

At that the girl flashed him a grin. "Mine too."

"So what House do you think you'll be in?"

"Well..." The girl actually seemed to ponder it for a moment, before shrugging. "I'm not really sure, I would say Slytherin or Ravenclaw, since my parents were in those houses, but the truth is nobody really knows where they'll be sorted until the sorting takes place. I just hope I'm not in Hufflepuff."

"And what's wrong with being sorted into Hufflepuff?" asked Harry, honestly curious. He also filed away the knowledge that both Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff were the other two houses at Hogwarts. Harry had only ever known of Gryffindor, because his parents were in it; and Slytherin, of course, because his father and his group of friends—miscreants his mum had called them one more than one occasion—pranked many of the students in Slytherin. They had not really spoken of the other houses, so Harry had not heard of them.

"Don't you know?" the girl asked, before hurrying on with the answer before Harry could say anything to the obviously rhetorical question.

"Hufflepuff's supposed to be the house of cowards and left overs. No one who goes to Hogwarts ever wants to go there."

The girl was leaning towards him slightly, as if what she was telling him was some great secret. Which would explain why she had missed the look of anger on the face of the young woman pinning up her robes. However, while the girl missed it, Harry was in the perfect position to see the expression.

"You were in Hufflepuff, weren't you?" Harry asked of the young woman. The girl's head turned in surprise as she looked at the woman pinning up her robes. Said woman gave the brunette a cold smile.

"Yes," she answered Harry's question. "I was one of those... left overs, as you called them."

"Urk." The girl made a strangled sound and her face began to pale, all except for her cheeks, which reddened as she realized her mistake. "Uh... I'm really sorry about that..." The woman huffed, but didn't say anything further as she continued working on the robes.

"You really should learn to be more careful when you speak," Harry admonished lightly. "You never know when someone around you might be insulted by what you say. Also, you probably shouldn't judge a person based on what house they go into. Preconceptions about someone because of where they're sorted can lead to making assumptions made out of ignorance, which could lead to a confrontation if you're not careful and insult the wrong person."

"Yes mum," the girl said with a slight roll of her eyes.

"You may roll your eyes now," Harry spoke with a tone of warning, "but when you end up inadvertently insulting someone again and they take greater offense than this nice woman did, just remember that I told you so."

The girl sighed. "Yeah, I get it." She grimaced. "You're probably right anyways. Dad always said I should learn to think before I speak." Which was exactly what he said just a few moments ago, he noted with amusement.

"You're dad sounds like a smart man," Harry said, getting the girl to stick her tongue out at him. He chuckled a bit at the childish return. Lisa always did something similar whenever she lost in their arguments.

"That's you done, dear," Madam Malkin said, interrupting any further attempt at conversation. Harry nodded and hopped of the stool.

"Do you think I could also get several sets of dress robes?" asked Harry.

"Of course," Madam Malkin smiled at him. "Just tell me how many, what colors, and what you would like them made out of."

"I want three, two black and one dark green," Harry began. "And what options do I have for the materials?"

"We have several," Madam Malkin began to list off the materials she had on her fingers. "We have cotton, wool, though neither of those make for very good dress robes. Our other two materials are linen and silk. If you want my opinion, our silk is the best material to use for dress robes. We use Acromantula silk."

"And what is Acromantula silk?" asked Harry, now curious. He had never heard of an Acromantula before, though judging from the name he could take a guess as to what one was.

"Acromantula silk is the fiber spun by Acromantula spiders to make their web. Not only is it very beautiful when woven together for clothing, it's also comfortable, and heat and magic resistant as well."

"I imagine it's also pricey," Harry pointed out. Not that price mattered much to him. From what he had just been told, Acromantula silk was the best material to make robes out of. If it weren't for the fact that Harry didn't want to seem like some kind of rich snob, he would have probably even considered using Acromantula silk for all of his robes.

"Yes." Madam Malkin looked reluctant to admit that. "One robe made from Acromantula silk costs two-hundred galleons." At that, the girl Harry had been talking with—who had been listening in on the conversation with growing enthusiasm—began looking dejected. Harry almost snorted. It seemed that even in the wizarding world all girls were fashionistas.

"I would like all of my dress robes made in Acromantula silk," Harry told the woman, shocking both her and the girl that had been listening—eavesdropping—on the conversation.

"Very well." Madam Malkin quickly recovered her smile and pleasant demeanor. "The dress robes will take a while, but they should be done in a day or so if you would like to come back then. Or I can have them sent to you."

"I'll come back," Harry said after a moment. "I'm probably going to be here often enough, so I'll just check in to see if they are done two days from now."

"Of course. Have a pleasant day, dear."

"And you as well," Harry gave her a small bow of the head, then turned to look at the brunette who was only just now recovering from her shock of someone spending over 600 Galleons on dress robes. "I'm sure we'll see each other at Hogwarts."

"Right. I'll see you around then." The girl waved at him as Harry walked out of the store.

XoX

The next two hours were spent with Harry visiting various shops to get the rest of the school supplies he would need. He ended up buying a pewter cauldron—he had thought about getting the golden one but that seemed really wasteful—as well as a set of scales for weighing potions ingredients. One of the things he had decided not to get was a telescope, which from what he had seen was a really old-fashioned model that would not look out of place in the fifteenth century. Harry had decided to instead buy a muggle telescope, as even the ones that did not require batteries to power them were far better than what he saw there. Other items Harry did not get were quills and ink bottles, having decided to also buy a set of calligraphy pens in muggle London that would give the same effect as an old fashion quill, only without the mess.

He did end up buying quite a few potions ingredients, nearly four times the amount of ingredients required by Hogwarts, at the apothecary, a

fascinating place with a most horrible stench. The place had smelled like a mixture of bad eggs and rotted cabbages. It was, quite possibly, one of the most putrid scents Harry had ever picked up, and that was saying something coming from him.

The last place Harry visited was the one place he had been looking forward to the most—other than *Flourish and Blotts*—the place where he would get his wand. *Ollivanders*.

The wand store was pretty run down, from what he could see. It was a narrow and shabby looking building, with peeling gold letters above the door that read *Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.*. Below that was a dusty window in which a single wand lay on a faded purple cushion.

Harry was not quite sure what to think about the place at first sight. On the one hand, it was like being in the Leaky Cauldron, and he had to wonder if the owner of this shop cared at all for how his store appeared. On the other hand, he got the distinct feeling it was made to appear like this on purpose. Something in the air spoke to him as he looked at the shop, as if saying 'this store doesn't need to look fancy in order to get it's customers' and, upon entering, Harry found out why.

A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the back of the shop as he entered and looked around. The store did not look like much. It was small, dusty and the only item in the room was a spindly chair. Despite it's rather lackluster appearance, however, Harry felt as if he had entered hallowed ground. Magic hung in the air, tingling and reverberating through his mind. It seemed to sing in his soul with a quiet reverence. He could hear what sounded like thousands of voices calling out—not to him he suspected, though he did not know why—in union.

And then he felt the presence behind him. Spinning on a dime Harry prepared to enter a combat stance, his mind going completely blank as he entered what he had taken to calling his 'combat mode.' His feet slid exactly shoulder width apart, left hand tucking into his torso where he could punch with both incredible force and speed, right hand stretching forward in order to parry any attack or pull someone into a grapple depending upon the situation.

Already his left hand was coming out in a straight jab aimed at where the solar plexus would be on his own body, which would leave anybody winded, before he had even finished his spin.

And then he stopped with his fist halfway to its mark. He blinked once, twice, thrice. After making sure his eyes were not deceiving him, Harry spent a moment trying to figure out how this old man managed to sneak up on him without him even noticing.

"Mr. Potter," the old man said, and Harry couldn't help but notice that the man's pale eyes had not even touched upon his scar hidden behind his bandana when he spoke. It was as if this man had known who he was before even entering the shop. "I was wondering when you would be coming by. I suspected I would be seeing you soon. You have your mother's eyes. It seems like only yesterday she was in here herself, buying her first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice wand for charms work."

Harry relaxed his stance as he realized that this man was likely the store owner. In return, Ollivander seemed to take notice of Harry's posture relaxing and nodded to himself.

"Your father, on the other hand, favored a mahogany wand. Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for Transfiguration. Well, I say your father favored it—it's really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course."

Now that he seemed to be out of danger, Ollivander moved closer to Harry. The boy in question tensed again, but relaxed a bit when he did not sense any hostile intent from the old man.

"And that's where..."

When Ollivander was no less than arms length apart, his hand came up and touched the bandana just where Harry's lightning shaped scar was. Harry almost flinched, but withheld the action by taking a slow breath.

"I'm sorry to say I sold the wand that did it," he said softly. "Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands... well, if I had known what that wand was going out in the world to

do..."

"Hind sight is always fifty-fifty, sir," Harry told Ollivander, not feeling any anger at hearing that this man sold Voldemort his wand. It would have been irrational to be angry at someone who was just doing there job. "You couldn't have known at the time that Voldemort would end up becoming one of the darkest and most powerful wizards of the century."

"That's wisdom speaking," Ollivander said as he took a step back, not flinching at Voldemort's name like Professor McGonagall had. "You are indeed correct; when the one who would become known as Lord Voldemort entered this store he was but a boy no older than you are now. No one could have known then how he would turn out. Still, I cannot help but feel regret at knowing the part I played in his rise to power."

Harry shrugged. "Had he not ended up with the wand you sold him, it would have simply been because he had another wand instead."

"Indeed," the old man murmured in a bit of a dazed tone, before seeming to perk up, his eyes snapping towards Harry. "Which is your wand arm?" he asked, pulling a long tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket.

"Neither," Harry answered. "I'm ambidextrous." It was a skill he had been born with as far as he could tell. He had never favored one hand over the hand, using both and switching up whenever he felt like it. Harry suspected it had something to do with his eidetic memory, but didn't know for sure.

"Fascinating," Ollivander said, seeming to ponder Harry's words for a moment. "Hold out both arms then, that's it." The tape measure suddenly sprung to life, and Harry very nearly smacked it across the room when it started measuring him. It measured Harry from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. Harry found the actions of the measure to be more than a bit intrusive, but stilled his tongue and fists by telling himself that all of this was so he could get his wand.

As his tape measure measured, Ollivander flitted around the shelves, taking down boxes. "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful

magical substance, Mr. Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

Harry frowned as the tape measure began measuring between his nostrils. He wondered if this was absolutely necessary in order for him to get his wand, or if perhaps Ollivander had simply forgotten to stop the tape as it measured him and it was now simply running on autopilot.

As if hearing his thoughts, Ollivander said, "that will do," and the tape measure stopped and crumbled to the floor in a heap. Ollivander then came up to Harry baring a wand in his hand that he offered to Harry. "Now then, Mr. Potter, try this one. Aspen, nine-and-a-quarter inches, with a Dragon heartstring core. Powerful, yet supple. Perfect for dueling. Just take it and give it a wave."

The moment Harry took the wand a frown came to his face. Not even bothering to wave it, he handed the wand back to Ollivander. "No, this one won't work."

Ollivander blinked.

"I don't feel anything from it," Harry explained, feeling the need to extrapolate on his reasons for not doing as asked.

"Don't feel anything you say?" Old Ollivander seemed very interested in what Harry was saying. His eyes seemed to shine even more, a pair of silver moons gleaming within the shop.

"Yes, I don't feel anything when I'm holding this wand."

Ollivander peered at him very closely, his eyes boring into Harry's with an intensity that almost startled the younger male. "And what is it, Mr. Potter, that you expect to feel?"

"I'm... not sure," Harry admitted. "But I expect that if a wand chooses me to be its partner, I should feel something." He held up the wand given to him by Ollivander. "When I hold this wand, it just feels like dead wood."

"Hmmm... most peculiar, most peculiar," Ollivander took the wand from Harry's hand, even as he continued to study the raven-haired youth. There was a building excitement in his eyes as he continued to speak. "It seems I have underestimated you, Mr. Potter. With the way you had almost attacked me I had suspected you would be a duelist, but it appears you are far more complex than I thought."

Harry had the decency to blush as he remembered getting ready to break the old man's nose before coming to his senses. "I do apologize for that," he said contritely. "I had sensed you behind me and was so shocked I reacted on instinct."

"I noticed," the old man replied as he walked back to the stack of boxes, frowning a bit as he began to rearrange them. Some of the boxes he grabbed and put back in their place, while at the same time pulling other boxes from the shelves. "That is why I first suspected you would be a duelist. The way you reacted was on instinct, quick, and impossible for anyone who does not have experience in fighting to do. I had thought an aspen wand would suit you, since aspen is the most suited wood towards dueling, but it appears as though I was wrong."

Rather than being put out by this, Ollivander appeared excited. It seemed that, rather than taking the fact that he was wrong poorly, the old wand-maker took it as a challenge.

"Here we are. Elm. Nine inches exactly, and with a phoenix feather core. Try it out." Harry held the wand, and almost immediately handed it back. Ollivander frowned. "Nothing?"

"Not nothing," Harry said. "It rejected me."

"Rejected?" Ollivander's eyebrows rose into his hairline, surprise clearly evident on his features.

"That's what it felt like," Harry frowned as he tried to place what he felt into words. "It's hard to describe, but it felt as though the wand was telling me that I was not the correct person to use it."

"Interesting," Ollivander mused. "It seems that you are very in tune with your magical core, Mr. Potter. That is a very rare feat, unheard of in one

so young. Many adult witches and wizards go there whole lives without ever touching their core; that you seem to be in tune with it is most remarkable."

"Magical core?" Harry frowned.

"Your magical core is where the magic inside of you comes from," Ollivander answered. "All beings who possess magic have it, this includes witches and wizards. It's your magical core that allows you to use magic in conjunction with your wand. There are also some people who are so in tune with their magical core that they can even cast magic wandlessly, though such instances are very rare." Ollivander gave him a knowing look. He didn't say anything, but Harry could tell from that single glance that the old man knew, or at least suspected, that the young man with the lightning-shaped scar was capable of producing wandless magic.

Did this mean the man could see his core? Or see his magic at least? Was it even possible to see magic? Harry could feel magic when it was in the air (at least he was pretty sure he could), but he had never heard of someone actually being able to physically 'see' magic.

It was just another thing he would have to look into when he got to Hogwarts.

"Your core," Harry started, haltingly. For a second he wondered if he should continue, but reasoned if the man truly knew as much as Harry suspected, then it wouldn't matter if he knew a bit more. And something else told him that his secret would be safe with the old wand-maker. "It's generally shaped as a sphere, yes?"

"So you have seen it," Ollivander breathed, excited. It wasn't a question. "Now this changes everything! I highly suspect, Mr. Potter, that we will need to make a new wand for you, for I doubt your partner has entered this world just yet. Still, why don't we try out a few more wands, just to make sure."

And try out wands they did. Harry held every wand made from every wood with every core and of every length. None of them felt right in his hands. Some gave him a distinct feeling of wrongness, a few gave him feelings of negativity, others reacted almost violently—one even blew up

in his hands and gave him several splinters—and still more than most he simply felt nothing from when held. It was nearly two hours later when Ollivander handed Harry the last wand he had in the shop.

"The last one. An unusual combination, holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple." Before Harry could even touch the wand he felt an immediate rejection from it. His hand stopped, halted right before his fingers could touch the wand, and he quickly withdrew it.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "That one will not work for me."

"I suspected as much," Ollivander admitted. "It seems that I was correct, and your wand still has yet to be born into this world." Rather than seeming discouraged, the old wand-maker looked excited, as if someone had breathed new life into him. Reaching under the counter, he pulled a long, thin piece that held the appearance of metal, but seemed far too organic to be such, whose shape roughly resembled that of a wand. "I will need you to pump your magic into this. As you are already in touch with your core, you should be capable of accomplishing this task rather easily."

Harry grabbed the thin object and closed his eyes. His breathing began to slow down, mind calming as he reached deep into himself, searching for his core.

He could see it within his mind's eye, the large ball of light that crackled and sparked as if containing the power of a thunder storm. Large wisps of energy seemed to exude from it, wafting off the ball like smoke from a roaring bonfire. It was very bright, brighter than the sun. This rolling mass of energy. Were he seeing this sight with his actual eyes, Harry would dare say looking at his core would have blinded him.

And then Harry opened up the floodgates. It was an act he had only done once and never did again, mainly due to the fact that he had nearly destroyed his room when he had done it. Usually when Harry used his magic, he simply opened the door a smidgeon, allowing just enough to leak out that he could direct it into whatever form of magic he planned on using. That was actually a part of the reason he got so tired, the concentration required to keep his own magic at bay was astronomical,

and often left him anywhere from mildly winded to utterly exhausted depending on how much he was forced to direct.

In this instance Harry followed his instincts, releasing his magic in it's entirety.

Harry did not direct the energy, merely letting it flow freely out of his body. The candles within the shop began to flicker out, the window frames rattled, several objects began floating into the air, and the small organic looking silver stick in Harry's hands began to drink in the energy with greed. Like a man dying of thirst it sucked all of the energy up, and as it did it began to glow in a green light the same color as his eyes, so bright Ollivander was nearly blinded.

"Mr. Potter! I believe that's enough!" Ollivander's shout broke through the thick haze that had become Harry's mind. A part of him didn't want to close the gates to his magic. This part of him wanted to revel in the feel of his power being released for the first time in so long. But another part, the more sensible part ruled by logic, told him it would be wise to listen to the wand-makers words, lest he want to blow up the store.

Thankfully, Harry's logical side was more powerful than his other side. With a great will of effort, the metaphorical gates that kept Harry's magical core slammed shut. The flow of magic stopped near instantaneously. The feel of magic all but disappeared, and the tingle that reminded one of static electricity hung in the air, the remnants of Harry's unleashed power, was sucked up into the organic stick, which now glowed and crackled with repressed green energy.

"Well," Ollivander sounded quite frazzled. He looked frazzled as well, Harry noted with some amusement. His eyes were wide, his clothing rumpled, and his hair was sticking on end, reminding Harry greatly of that cartoon, Tom and Jerry, where the cat would get his tail plugged into a socket and subsequently electrocuted. "I believe that we are done for the day. Why don't you... head home, and I will send for you when your wand is ready."

Harry nodded. "Very well, I look forward to seeing what you bring into this world."

Recovering his wits, his hair still reminiscent of a mad scientist catching the tail-end of an explosion from an experiment gone wrong, Ollivander's eyes lit up as he replied. "And I shall look forward to showing you. Now, off with you, Mr. Potter. I have work to do."

With another nod, Harry left. He had a feeling that the old wand maker was looking forward to getting started on making his wand. He was not wrong, for as soon as he exited the shop, a 'closed' sign appeared within the window. Yes, it appeared as though Ollivander was as excited to make Harry's wand as Harry was to receive it.

As if sensing his presence leaving the store, Hedwig flew down and landed on his outstretched arm, which had been extended at the same time the Owl began flying down to him.

"I think this day has been rather productive," Harry told Hedwig, feeling giddy from all the magic he had used in Olivanders shop. It was a very strange feeling, he had to admit. A part of him wondered if this was what it felt like to be high.

Hedwig cocked her head to the side and hooted.

"Yes," Harry answered with a nod. "We'll be heading home now."

Hedwig gave another hoot.

"Hungry again? You sure do eat a lot Hed?"

An angry hoot was his response, this time as Hedwig's feathers became ruffled.

"No, that wasn't a comment on your weight. Though if you are concerned about that you should probably lay off the bacon."

Another angry hoot followed by Hedwig pecking at his head was her answer.

"Ouch! Cut it out Hedwig, it was just a joke! Gah! Stop it, Hedwig! Hedwig!"

XoX

Harry arrived home at nearly seven o'clock with Hedwig sitting on his outstretched arm. All members of the Dursley household had done their best to ignore him as he walked up to his room. It seemed as if they were worried about Harry becoming even more of a danger now that he was going to be learning magic, and were intent on hoping that by pretending he didn't exist, he would simply disappear. This suited him just fine however, as he had other things to occupy his thoughts.

Entering his room Harry set his trunk down and opened it. He began pulling out several items, including an owl stand for Hedwig, the book *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*, and the backpack he had first taken with him that now carried the few items he had gotten from his mother's vault.

After setting the book and backpack on his bed, Harry unzipped the small pouch at the front of the backpack and pulled out the box containing his mother's wand. He stared at it and wondered: would it be possible for him to use his mother's wand to perform spells? Unlike all the wands he had tried in Ollivanders, his mother's wand gave feelings of acceptance and love. Did that mean it would allow him to use it even if they were not really partners? He supposed he would find out when he began practicing spell casting. But that would come later. Right now there were things he needed to get started on, mainly acquiring the knowledge he would need to catch up with the most recent history of the wizarding world.

Placing the box containing his mum's wand on the desk, Harry went back to his bed, picked up the book, got himself comfortable, and began to read.

Here we all are! I hope you enjoyed the chapter, since the next one won't come out until after Thanks Giving. And speaking of Thanks Giving, I hope all of you have a happy one.

Cheers!

Tonks & Tonks

Tonks and Tonks

Maddening. That was the word I'd use to describe my thoughts in that moment. Another week had passed and I was no closer to understanding what my teacher meant by his words. What did he mean when he said I needed to "admit my real reasons for being there?" I already knew my reasons. It was to prove my superiority over the Dursleys. To show them that I was better than they are. That was my reason. My only reason.

Right?

XoX

Harry swept into Gringotts and made for the nearest available teller. Wearing new clothing that would help him blend in better, he looked every bit the part of a young wizard. With an outfit consisting of black dress slacks, polished dragon hide boots, a black button up shirt with a larger than average collar, black gloves, and a long dark green cloak, the young raven-haired boy couldn't help but feel kind of like a Jedi. It was an amusing notion, especially when he considered how everyone else was dressed in similar robes. They were like a Jedi conclave, and the goblins were like ruder versions of Yoda.

"I would like to speak with my account manager at his earliest convenience," Harry spoke the moment he stopped in front of an empty teller station.

"Do you have an appointment?" asked the Goblin without looking up from the ledger he was writing in.

"Yes."

"Name?"

"Harry Potter."

At his name being told, the Goblin finally looked up at Harry. He eyed the boy for a second, his eyes going to the lightning bolt scar on his forehead. The Goblin grunted. "Ragnok is currently busy. He will see you when he has the time. Please wait over there and he will be with you momentarily."

Harry did not offer any words, only giving a nod before moving to stand at the place the teller had designated for him to wait. Closing his eyes, he began to focus his magic on enhancing his hearing as a basic meditation excessive.

Enhancement was one of the five magics that Harry could do, and according to what he had read so far it was the only branch of magic he had that didn't have an equivalent in the wizarding world. Much like its name stated, enhancement was the simple act of enhancing a physical aspect of himself. He could enhance just about anything, from increasing the acuteness of his five senses, to increasing the durability and strength of his body.

Of course, enhancing his body took a lot more effort and would often leave him beyond exhausted when finished, which was the reason he never used it in combat. It was simply too dangerous. Harry had theorized that it had something to do with the way his magic flowed through him during that time. His belief was that due to the magic increasing his physical abilities, they would become acclimated to having that power in them. When the magic left, the muscles would become tired because they no longer had any power bolstering them. It was a workable theory, and one that he would be testing as much as possible when he had the time.

The sound of footsteps drew his attention away from his meditation. Opening his eyes, Harry found himself staring at a familiar Goblin.

"Griphook," he said in greeting. The Goblin, Griphook, paused, seemingly surprised that Harry actually remembered him. He got over his shock quickly however, and gestured for Harry to follow him.

"Follow me."

Once more Harry was led to the office where his account manager

worked. Ragnok was sitting behind the desk just as he had been the last time they had spoken. The Goblin was leafing through several scrolls, documents most likely, but looked up when Harry came in.

"Lord Potter," Ragnok placed the scrolls off to the side. "What can I do for you today?"

"I would like to start investing," Harry began without preamble. He had been studying up on Goblin society in the hopes that by doing so, he would not only be able to work with the Goblins, but also gain their respect. After all, they did control his money, and ill begotten was the fool who insulted those who controlled your vaults.

He had learned much about Goblins and their society, but one of the most important things he had learned was that to a Goblin, time is money. They do not like to waste time with inane pleasantries. They do not appreciate the posh and circumstance that surrounds many wizarding traditions. The best thing for anyone to do when dealing with a Goblin is to get right to the point so they can get on with their life and begin making more money.

"Invest?" Ragnok looked at him in surprise. It only lasted for a second, but it was almost enough to make Harry lose his calm and collected facade and smile. Looking at him with an intense look of interest, the Goblin account manager leaned forward on his desk and spoke once more. "And just what would you like to invest in, Lord Potter?"

"I have several businesses I wish to invest in," Harry began, pulling a scroll with a list of various business and ideas from within his cloak. He set it on Ragnok's desk for the goblin to peruse through with his own eyes. "However, I am also unsure of how investing in a company works in the wizarding world. Tell me, does the wizarding world have a stock market?"

"A what?" Ragnok looked up from the list to Harry, blinking several times at the unfamiliar term. Ragnok clearly didn't know what Harry was talking about, making it easy to deduce that the Wizarding World did not have their own stock market. Or perhaps they did, but it was just called something else.

Straightening his shoulders a bit, Harry began to explain the basic concept of the stock market. He went into the idea of how a company's stock could be bought as shares, a single unit of ownership in a corporation, mutual fund, or any other organization, and how a shareholder could buy and sell their shares in order to turn a profit.

The explanation was very basic, very brief, as Harry knew that going into detail would take a long time and would likely end up angering Ragnok for wasting his time. Throughout his small lecture, the Goblin in charge of his accounts sat behind his desk, elbows propped up on the surface, fingers laced in front of his face as he listened to Harry speak. He gave no indication on whether or not he was even interested in what the young wizard was saying, merely listening silently before the explanation began to wind down.

"Interesting, there are some businesses in the wizarding world that hold a somewhat similar concept," Ragnok told Harry after the explanation was finished. "However, they are not the same as this 'stock market.' The closest example I can think of is the Daily Prophet, which is owned and controlled by a board of governors, rather than a single person."

Harry hummed for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. "In that case, what do you believe is the best way to invest my money?"

"The best way to increase the amount of money in your vault is to own several businesses," Ragnok answered easily. "You can do this easily by buying a business outright, but that is also dependent on whether or not the owner will sell their business to you. If you want my opinion, right now the best way for you to make money would be to buy out the property and land upon which specific businesses are built on and charge them a monthly fee for using it. It's a rather simple way to earn money, but very effective in this day and age."

After thinking on Ragnok's advice for a moment, Harry nodded his head. "Very well, since I am unable to access the Potter vault, we'll be using my mother's vault to begin investing." He paused, cocking his head to the side for a moment. "Aside from those businesses I have listed on there, I also plan on investing some money on a few muggle ventures. Does Gringotts have a way to connect their vaults to a muggle bank account?"

Ragnok frowned for a moment, clearly thinking. "Theoretically it is possible," he allowed slowly. "However, such a thing has never been attempted before. If we could get some people on the inside of a muggle bank and know which account we are connecting one of our vaults to, we should be able to magically link the two together. It would likely take a while though."

"How long?"

"I suspect it would take maybe six months," Ragnok admitted reluctantly. It seemed to Harry that the goblin did not like to admit that it would take so long to do something. He was probably disappointed as that would mean less time to make money, Harry reasoned.

"In that case I'll be heading down to my mother's vault after this meeting is over. I'll take ten thousand galleons, convert those into pounds and open up an account under my name at HSBC Holdings in London. I'll send the information on my account via owl once it's set up so that you can have your people begin linking the account to my vault. Also, while I begin investing money into several muggle ventures that I feel will turn a profit, I want you to begin investing the rest of the money in the Evans account into the businesses on that list, as well as any ventures you feel will help increase the vaults revenue. Tell me, what is the standard rate an account manager makes off of the vaults increased worth?"

"Standard rates are a fifteen percent of the profit."

Harry nodded. "I want you to take twenty percent of whatever profit is made," he told Ragnok, getting a set of wide eyes from said Goblin in return. This time, Harry did allow a smile to show on his face at shocking the Goblin. "Think of this as incentive to make sure the gold within the Evans Vault grows."

After taking a few seconds to get over his shock, Ragnok grinned. "You would make a good goblin, Lord Potter," he complimented, and for the first time since Harry had met him, the account manager actually seemed to be a bit more at ease and visibly excited—to be making more money, that is.

"Thank you," Harry said with a nod. "And now that this is done, I just have

one last question to ask before I head down to my mum's vault."

Ragnok quirked an eyebrow in curiosity. "And that is?"

"Which Solicitor would you recommend I see for legal matters involving my name being used without my consent?"

XoX

The building to the Solicitor office that Ragnok had directed him to was located in, of all places, muggle London. It turned out that the Solicitor in question, a woman who went by the name Andromeda Tonks, was actually a very popular Solicitor working for the legal company Tonks & Tonks, which, according to Ragnok, was owned by Andromeda and her husband, Theodore Tonks.

The building that held the office was two stories tall, made from red brick and was very non-descript. There were several windows, which Harry could not see through due to the shutters on them being closed. Judging from the feel of magic surrounding it, Harry could only assume that it was also where the Tonks family lived. The second floor was likely their home, while the first was where they did their business.

The sound of a bell tinkled as he walked into the building, and Harry found himself in a well-furnished room with several comfortable armchairs and a desk a little ways away, where a middle aged man with salt and pepper hair in a professional slicked back style sat. He was wearing an expensive suede suit that looked more suitable on a muggle than a wizard. Only the hint of magic that clung to this man let Harry know he was not a muggle.

The man looked up from where he was reading a book—a science fiction book—and blinked in surprise when he noticed that the person entering his building was a kid.

Not wanting this man to mistake him for a child who'd gotten lost and walked in to ask for help, Harry quickly said, "You are Theodore Tonks, yes?"

The man blinked several more times, before nodding. "Yes, that is

correct..." he paused, frowning. "Can I help you?"

"I have an appointment with Andromeda Tonks set for half an hour past two," Harry said, subtly telling the man that he was not only a customer but also a wizard. Theodore Tonks' eyes widened very briefly, before returning to normal. He gave Harry a nod.

"Yes, she told me that a Mr. Evans would be coming in to see her," he frowned as he eyed Harry for a moment. Since the Solicitor was living amongst muggles, he had opted to dress in more normal clothing, black pants, a dark green short-sleeved collared shirt, and his converse shoes. He also had a beanie on his forehead, hiding his scar from view. However, Harry suspected that the reason Theodore was glancing at him so curiously was due to his age, not his clothing. He'd probably never expected to receive a customer so young. "Let me go and see if my wife is ready to receive you."

"Thank you," Harry said gratefully as the man stood up and walked through a door in the back of the room. Sitting down on one of the chairs, Harry looked at the selection of magazines and newspapers available for reading.

His eyes eventually caught sight of the Daily Prophet Newspaper under several magazines. He was surprised to see the newspaper used in the magical world in this workspace. It was well-known to him by now that the magical world had a strict isolationist policy, and that it was against the law to reveal its existence to those who were not magical. It made him wonder why these solicitors actually made the Daily Prophet available for reading.

Those thoughts left him when he touched the newspaper and his fingertips began to tingle with the familiar feeling of magic. There seemed to be some kind of spell on the newspaper, perhaps the same one the Leaky Cauldron used to keep itself hidden from the non magical populace. Or maybe some kind of variant due to its smaller size...

He shook his head, dispelling his thoughts and possible theories on the magic being used to hide the newspaper. It wasn't like he could find out at the moment, and there were more important things to worry about.

Picking up the Daily Prophet, Harry read the first article he laid eyes on.

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on the 31st July, widely believed to be the work of dark wizards or witches unknown. Gringotts goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day.

"But we're not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spokes goblin this afternoon.

Harry frowned as he read the article, his mind whirring in thought. From what he now knew about Gringotts, the Goblin owned bank was supposed to be one of the most magically secure places in the entire world. Traps, enchantments, guards, dragons, if it was dangerous and had the potential to kill, then it was probably being used to guard the Vaults below Gringotts main building. The fact that someone would be stupid enough to actually attempt to steal from the bank was shocking. The fact that they had not been caught even more so.

He discarded the knowledge that the break-in was the same day as his birthday. It was an interesting fact, but not entirely relevant. More to the point, he was rather curious to know what the alleged Dark witch or wizard had been after. It was obvious to him that whatever it was, the person who owned the vault had obviously been aware of it being in danger and had it taken out before it could be stolen.

A good thing too, as the item or items seemed to have been taken out that very same day.

The sound of footsteps reached Harry's ear, and he turned his head in time to see Theodore Tonks open the door and walk back in.

"She's able to see you now. Just go through the door and down the hall. Her office is at the end of the hall on the right. I would show you where, but I'm needed to man the front. Our normal worker is out sick today."

"It's fine, I'm sure I can find my way there," Harry replied, before setting

the Daily Prophet down and doing as instructed. Andromeda's office was very easy to find, not only due to the directions given, but also because there was a plaque with her name on it on the door. Knocking once Harry entered after receiving permission from someone inside.

The room looked like every office he had ever seen. The carpet was colored beige, and the walls and ceiling were a light cream. A book shelf sat next to a filing cabinet at one end of the office, while a window with its blinds closed was embedded into the other. Near the back of the room was a desk made out of a varnished dark wood with a woman sitting behind it.

The woman in question was very beautiful. She had long black hair that fell down her back in gentle waves and framed a face that was regal and aristocratic, reminiscent of royalty. Her eyes were a dark brown that held within them a warmth Harry recognized as belonging to a mother, and her ruby-red lips contrasted nicely with her porcelain skin.

Like her husband, she wore a business suit, dark black with a white undershirt, a blouse, black stockings and a pair of high-heeled shoes. The suit gave her a very professional image, yet did not detract from her femininity.

In spite of the fact that he'd never seen this woman before—and he would know—Harry thought she looked very familiar. Not in the way of someone he had met but did not remember, but more like he'd seen someone who looked similar. Shaking the thoughts away, he walked further into the room.

"You are Mr. Evans?" Andromeda asked, looking up at him from where she sat. Her eyes looked him up and down uncertainly. She probably hadn't been expecting the person who hired her to be so young, much like her husband, Harry mused. Or perhaps her husband had told her and she had not believed him. Not that he could fault her either way.

"Not exactly," Harry answered, causing Andromeda's brows to furrow. "Evans was my mother's maiden name, which I used because I wanted to keep my anonymity until I could be assured my identity would remain secret. Before I go into who I am, I would like to know your policy on

client confidentiality."

Andromeda raised a single eyebrow and studied him for a moment before answering his question. "We hold client confidentiality to the highest level possible. Whenever we take a case for a witch or wizard, we swear a magical oath to never reveal the secrets of our client, even after the case has been closed."

Hearing this set Harry's mind at ease. He had read about magical oaths, oaths sworn on ones very magic and had to be upheld or the one who took the oath would lose all their magic, thereby becoming a squib, a muggle born to magical parents but had no magic to speak of. It was one of the highest forms of oath taking one could make—second to unbreakable oaths—and not to be done lightly.

"In that case, would you mind terribly if you took an oath not to reveal anything that I disclose to you during this meeting and further meetings should I decide to hire you?" Harry saw Andromeda's brow furrowing further and could almost see her thoughts. On the one hand, what he was asking was very unorthodox. He had not even hired her, yet he wanted her to swear a magical oath? It was not only unusual, but something that would have immediately turned off most witches and wizards.

On the other hand, she was intrigued. What could possibly be so important that he would ask her to swear a magical oath before they had even brokered an agreement?

It was her curiosity over that single question that ultimately won out.

"Very well," Andromeda replied as she took out her wand and placed near her heart and prepared to speak her oath. "I will need to know who you really are before I can take the oath."

"Right," Harry sighed, slowly raising a hand to pull down the beanie. His messy black hair fell free, the lightning bolt scar on his forehead showing prominently between choppy strands of raven-colored hair. He looked at the now shocked Andromeda with a slight smile. "My name is Harry Potter."

It took the woman a few moments to regained her wits. She recovered from her shock much faster than he expected her too, and before long was exuding the same aura of professionalism she had before finding out his real identity.

"I can see why you want to remain anonymous. I do not know why you are here, Mr. Potter, but I am sure there would have been an entire article speculating about it in the Daily Prophet by tomorrow morning should the knowledge leak."

"You are correct about that," Harry told her with a nod. She was only half right however, as it wasn't that Harry wished to keep what would happen here a secret, just that he wanted to be the one in control of *when* everybody learned of what took place this day. "Can you take that oath now, please? I would like for us to get down to business."

"Of course," Andromeda cleared her throat and once more pointed the wand at her heart, before reciting her magical oath. "I, Andromeda Tonks, do hereby swear on my magic to keep all the secrets of Lord Harry James Potter and uphold his confidentiality to the highest degree before, after and during the course of our business. So mote it be."

A brief flash light emitted from her wand, letting the two know that the oath had taken hold. Setting her wand on the table, Andromeda folded her hands in front of her on the desk.

"Now then, Mr. Potter, perhaps you can explain to me what it is you need a Solicitor for."

Harry nodded and reached into the small nap sack he was carrying on his back. Andromeda raised her left eyebrow when he placed a book on the table. It was one of the many books about him, this one was dubbed, *Harry Potter and the Princess' Curse*.

"I have just recently discovered that this book along with sixteen others were released between the years 1984 and 1989," Harry began, taking a moments pause to regain control of the anger he felt. Even now it was difficult not to be angry about this. "These books are completely false. I do not know what the wizarding world assumed I was doing or where I was after Voldemort's (Andromeda flinched at the name but Harry

ignored her as he continued) demise, but the truth of the matter is that I was living in the muggle world with my mum's relatives, and have only rejoined the magical community a short while ago. I did not even know these books existed, much less given the people who published these stories permission to use my name in their work."

Another pause followed as Harry took a calming breath.

"These books are not the only items that bare my name on them," Harry continued softly. "I've found everything from action figures, to brooms, to advertisements, all of which have claimed that I endorse their products."

"And you want to take legal action against the companies that have used your name without your consent," Andromeda said, getting a nod from the young man. She leaned back then, letting her posture relax slightly and folded her hands in her lap. "This is a very unique situation you have found yourself in, Mr. Potter. If the person presenting me with this case were anyone other than yourself and a few other people, I would not be able to do much."

"Because of the publishing law of 1955, right? The law that states 'all stories used for entertainment purposes need not contain factual information or require consent of the person or persons in question,'" Harry said, surprising Andromeda. He smiled at her. "Don't think I didn't come to you prepared for this. There is a reason I waited so long after entering the magical world before I scheduling an appointment with you. I've done extensive research on all laws pertaining to the problem I am presenting to you."

Gathering her wits about her, Andromeda said, "if you have studied all of the laws, then does that mean you know of the one pertaining to the heirs of pureblood families?"

"You mean the pureblood media protection act of 1743, which states that 'without documented proof that could be verified in front of the entire wizengamot, there can be no slander or misprint of information about a noble, pureblood family.' This law also implicitly states that it is impossible to use the name or image of the person in question without their express permission to do so, so long as they belong to a pureblood family that

has been given the title of a Noble House."

"Yes, back then the newspaper media was much smaller than it was today and did not have much control over the population as it does now. Of course," Andromeda added after a moment's inflection, "back then the newspaper was used for keeping people updated on current events, not entertainment like it is today. At the time there had been an article written about a scandal that involved the pureblood scion of a Noble House. The pureblood was outraged and had managed to gather like-minded individuals who believed in pureblood superiority by claiming 'if it could happen to him, what's to stop the newspaper from running other pureblood names through the mud as well.' Needless to say, the newspaper was hit hard, and the pureblood media protection act was put in place shortly after."

"Yes, I am well aware of that act," Harry told her. "That's why I came to you, because unlike a muggleborn or half-blood who does not belong to a family of any esteem, I happen to be the heir to the Potter fortune, one of the Five Founding Families who had a hand in creating the Ministry of Magic. Even though I am technically a half-blood, the laws behind the pure-blood protection act apply to me because I belong to a powerful pureblood house. And not only am I the heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter, I am also the boy-who-lived. My fame combined with my title would make it political suicide for anyone to go against me."

"That is very true," Andromeda said as she studied the boy with a curious gleam in her eyes. "Even without an airtight case, you would still likely win due to the political minefield simply from being the boy-who-lived, and that's not even going into the public outrage those companies would face when it is learned they have been wrongfully using your name. This case is easily going to be the biggest one I've ever seen, and the only question I need to ask now is what you want to get out of it."

"What do I want?" Harry closed his eyes as he parroted the question. "Personally, what I want is for those companies who have used my name to be sued for every single knut they are worth, publicly disgraced, and cast out on the street in rags." He told the woman with complete, brutal honesty, getting Andromeda to raise both eyebrows in surprise, most likely at the harsh punishment he wanted for those using his name. "But

we both know that such a thing isn't possible, even with my fame and fortune. And doing that would not only put the people up top out on the streets, but also those working under the people who used my name and image without consent."

Harry would not let innocent people who were only doing their job get caught up in his desire for revenge. Doing so would put him on a level lower than the Dursleys, and he would never again allow himself to stoop so low.

"Instead, what I am thinking is that we sue them for sixty-five percent of the profit they have made off my name and image. I doubt we'll get the full sixty-five, but if we start off big we can probably end up with somewhere around forty percent of the profit. I also want thirty percent of the revenue any company makes for selling anything that has been making money off my name, which we will not negotiate with them on. Also, all the companies who wrote those books about me will write a public apology that will be put on the front page of the Daily Prophet, stating that the stories are not true and were merely written for entertainment purposes. Furthermore, I want the companies that have published these books to sign a magical contract stating they will no longer make any new stories about me, unless I give them my consent."

As Harry began listing all of the things he wanted to accomplish with this lawsuit, Andromeda's eyebrows had been steadily raising higher and higher, until they completely disappeared behind the bangs of her dark hair. It seemed she had not been prepared for just how much thought Harry had put into his plans for suing the people who had used his name.

She recovered quickly, however, before he had gotten halfway through his list, and had since been dutifully jotting down everything he said on a muggle notepad. When Harry finished, she went over everything written down, carefully clarifying certain points with Harry before she was satisfied.

"I believe that everything you have asked me to accomplish is doable," Andromeda told him, much to Harry's secret delight. "Were it anybody else I would say this lawsuit didn't stand a chance, but since it's you, it is not only very possible, but very likely that we will win. Especially if we

threaten to take this all the way up to the Wizengamot."

Harry leaned forward eagerly. "How long do you think it will take for the lawsuit to go through?"

"That would depend," Andromeda said slowly, leaning back in her chair. "The first thing I will need to do is research to find out which companies have been using your name and image. You may not know it, but Britain is not the only country in which your name is famous. While You-Know-Who did not do much terrorizing outside of our country, he was still feared in every country that holds a seat on the I.C.W.. There has to be at least a hundred companies that have used your name to turn a profit in some way."

"Another problem is that you are a minor. You may be the heir to an Ancient and Most Noble House, and you may be the boy-who-lived, but that does not change the fact that you are a minor who has no Magical Guardian. It won't change the outcome of our case," she assured Harry when he began to frown. "But it will take a little longer before I can present the case before the court. There are legalities that I have to go through in order to get permission from the Ministry, which will take even longer if you want to keep yourself anonymous until our case is presented."

"I can see how that would cause a delay." Harry grimaced. He'd not thought of the legalities involved. "How long do you suspect it will take?"

"I would hazard a guess that it will take about a year all things told," she informed him. "I should have all of the information regarding the companies we plan on suing within six months, and then another six months to turn that into an airtight case they have no chance of escaping from without agreeing to your demands."

Thinking over what she had told him, he nodded, "that's fine. I can wait." It was slightly annoying, but he didn't want his lawsuit to gain any hitches down the road because he was impatient and overzealous.

And it wasn't like Harry couldn't wait, wasn't there an old saying 'good things come to those who wait?' All it would take was a little patience, something he had an abundance of.

"Excellent." Andromeda smiled at him. "Now all we need to talk about is your payment. I will need a deposit of one-thousand galleons. This is simply for the time I'm going to be putting into your case. Consider it a down payment for services rendered. If the case itself is successful, which I have no doubt it will be, the required payment will be fifteen percent of what we get off the lawsuit. This does not include the money you would make after our successful campaign; just the percentage of what they pay up front. Also, I will need you to sign a magical contract stating your agreement for our deal."

Closing his eyes, Harry took a moment to think about her required payment. Truthfully, he thought it a good deal. If the companies made even half of the money off him that he thought they did, then it was very likely Harry would be making well over several million galleons off this lawsuit. However, he was a bit leery of signing a magical contract, which would bind his magic to the contract so he couldn't break it without losing his magic.

Still, Andromeda had already given a magical oath—freely at that. In the face of her doing that for him, how could he doing anything less?

"Do you have the contract written up?" Harry asked, eyes snapping open, his sharpened gaze landing on her.

"Not right now," Andromeda admitted. "Because all cases are different, all of our contracts are written differently. I can write one up for you to read over in a few days, however."

"That sounds agreeable."

Harry pulled his money pouch out of his backpack and retracted the necessary funds. He placed the money on the table in front of Andromeda in neat stacks.

"Thank you for your time, and for agreeing to my request for a magical oath before even hearing my desired case," he said with a bow of his head. Andromeda smiled.

"You're welcome. To be honest, it's no trouble at all. Aside from my dislike of people who are willing to use a child's name for their own gain, I dislike

the fact that they are using your name even more. While I did not know either of your parents very well, as I was a few years ahead of them at Hogwarts, I did consider them to be friends of mine. I was greatly saddened when they... past on."

At her words, Harry's look turned a bit uncertain. "Speaking of family, do you think I could ask you something?"

Andromeda looked curious at his words and his sudden change in demeanor, but nodded nonetheless. "Go ahead."

"Forgive me if this is a little personal but... do you know a man by the name of Sirius Black?"

The surprise she exuded was far more pronounced when he spoke that name than anything he had said thus far. Andromeda's entire body seemed to stiffen and her eyes went wide as saucers.

"How..." The dark haired woman choked for a second before finding her voice, though when she spoke, it was very hoarse. "How do you know that name?"

Harry squirmed at her look. He'd not been sure what to expect when he brought this up, having pretty much asked his question in a bout of spontaneous curiosity due to her odd familiarity, but whatever he'd been expecting, it was not the sudden wave of emotions she unleashed upon him. The heartrending sadness, the deep seated anger of betrayal, or the gaping sense of loss that Harry could feel coming from the woman made him flinch.

"I found my mum's journals in her vault when I went to visit it," Harry answered softly. "She spoke about Sirius Black; she wrote that he was my father's best friend, and had formed a group with my father and two others called the Marauders."

All of this was the truth, of course. Harry *had* found his mother's journal, and it *did* talk about Sirius, his father, and the Marauders. However, he had known about these things long before finding his mum's journal. His parents had spoken about their Hogwarts days a lot, and Harry had met Sirius Black on many occasions before he and his parents went into

hiding.

"I have a few pictures of them, my parents and their friends I mean, and you look kind of similar to Sirius. Same general facial shape, similar eyes and the same hair color. When I first saw you, I thought you might be his sister."

"You're close," Andromeda admitted with a sad smile. "Sirius was my first cousin back when I was still a Black."

"Still a Black?" Harry asked, furrowing his brows. Andromeda looked at him for a moment, as if deciding what she should tell him, before nodding.

"Yes, you see, I used to be Andromeda Black before I got married. Now, while I would have still been considered a Black if I married a pureblood, I ended up falling in love with and marrying Ted, whose muggleborn. My family is one of those who believed in pureblood superiority to the point of hating muggles and muggleborns without justification or cause. Upon discovering my nuptials with Ted they, in a fit of rage, disowned me from the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black."

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly after she finished speaking, feeling ashamed of himself. Was he really this insensitive? "I shouldn't have asked such a personal question."

"No, no, it's fine," Andromeda assured him. She wiped at her suspiciously wet eyes, then offered him a small smile. "I can understand your curiosity. Out of all my family, Sirius was the only one who kept in touch with me after I was disowned. We had always been close; I was even closer to him than I was to my own sisters. I was... very shocked to hear about his betrayal of your parents."

A prominent frown grew on Harry's face. He had learned from his books that Sirius Black was the one who had betrayed his parents to Voldemort. Nowadays the man was suffering in Azkaban Prison, the wizarding world's most notorious prison due to the 'jailors' there.

If Harry were completely honest, he was not sure what to think. When he had first learned that Sirius had betrayed his parents, he couldn't believe

it either. Out of all the people his parents knew, Sirius Black had been the one who visited them the most before they went into hiding. Even now after learning of the man's betrayal, Harry still fondly remembered the mischievous man who often received more lectures from his mum than even his dad did.

Unfortunately, he also had no proof that the man was innocent. His mother's journal was mostly filled with her time at Hogwarts, and only touched what happened after they all graduated very briefly. Harry assumed she had simply stopped writing once she and his father had entered the war.

"So was I," Harry said, fighting down his own emotions. Clearing his mind with a simple breathing exercise, he looked back at the woman. "Thank you, I know it was rude of me to ask you something so personal, and it must have been even more difficult to tell me this."

Smiling at the polite young man, Andromeda shook her head. "It wasn't that difficult. In fact, it feels kind of nice to be able to unload on someone. I love my husband, but he didn't have any connections to Sirius like I did, and he had never really liked the man after getting strung up by his underwear during one of the Marauder's pranks."

Harry snorted a bit as his mind conjured an amusing image of Theodore Tonks in nothing but his boxer shorts as he was hung off a flag pole. Dispelling the image with a small shake of his head, he decided that there was one other thing he wanted to ask of the woman.

"So you're also a member of one of the Founding Five, then?"

"I was." Andromeda put an emphasis on the 'was' to signify that she was no longer of that House.

"Right, was." Harry nodded, not really finding an issue with her not being in that family anymore—not for what he wanted to ask. "Does that mean you were taught pureblood customs, etiquette and traditions?"

"Yes..." Andromeda replied slowly, her eyes searching his, no doubt trying to ascertain where he was going with this.

Harry gave her a charming smile. "In that case, I was wondering if perhaps you could help me with something else besides my lawsuit case?"

So here is the next chapter. We are getting closer and closer to the moment when Harry will be going to Hogwarts. In fact, the next chapter is the last one before Harry gets on the Hogwarts Express, so you have something to look forward to.

The Hardest Part is Saying Goodbye

Chapter 8: The Hardest Part is Saying Goodbye

It happened during my second week after speaking with Master Wei. I was angry, filled with a black rage that caused my mind to become hazed with red. Dudley had been being his usual pesky self, annoying me with his spoiled attitude and generally unpleasant disposition.

"I wanna go to Disneyland! I wanna go to Disneyland!" He cried and shouted and screamed and raged. Petunia did everything she could to make him settle down. She promised they would go eventually, that he just needed to wait for Vernon's next paycheck, but it was no use. The boy continued whining. He wanted to go now!

I'd had enough.

"Shut up!"

Calling upon my magic, feeling it course through my body like a maelstrom, I wrenched Dudley out of his seat and slammed him against the wall.

"Dudley!" The scream tore from Petunia's throat. She turned her attention on me, her eyes filled with the rage of a protective mother. "Let go of him!"

As Petunia charged me, I directed some magic towards her. I watched apathetically as her body flew headfirst into the island in the dining room. From the way her limp body crumpled to the ground, I could tell she was unconscious.

I turned back to Dudley, still pinned to the wall, dazed but struggle. I stalked up to him, the fire of my rage burning ever hotter, fueling me with the darkest of desires even I had not thought myself capable of.

The boy became more cognizant. I watched as his eyes locked with

mine. I saw the realization in them.

I saw the fear.

It made me pause.

I stared into those eyes, so familiar, so horrifyingly familiar. I knew those eyes. I knew that look. I recognized them. Those were they eyes I used to have every time Uncle Vernon was angry at me. Every time he threatened me with violence. Every time he locked me in the broom cupboard. Whenever I saw my reflection during those times, I had those eyes.

I suddenly felt sick.

As my magic dispersed like a violent wind and Dudley dropped to the ground, I raised a hand to my mouth, trying not to vomit.

The need to run overpowered me. Without a backward glance I rushed out of the house as a horrible realization struck me far harder than Vernon's fist ever could. And so I ran. I ran far and hard. I ran to the one place, the one person, who might be able to offer me advice.

I could only hope he could help me.

XoX

Harry woke up with rays of sunlight shining in his eyes. After blinking several times for his eyesight to adjust, the young 11-year old looked around and saw that, much like he had suspected, he was laying on the couch in Lisa's living room.

Also, much like he had expected, Lisa was still with him, curled up like a cat as she lay on his chest. Her arms were wound tightly around his torso, preventing him from moving much. Despite how the girl was a heavy sleeper, even the slightest of movements seemed to make her tighten her grip, as if she knew he was trying to escape.

Somehow, despite the fact that Harry had expected to find himself in this situation, he was still surprised. It had been a long time since he and Lisa

had fallen asleep together. The last time it had happened was when they were nine. The Dursleys had gone on vacation to Italy and he had not been allowed to go with them.

In an act of incredible kindness, Anastasia Crawft had offered Harry a place to stay, since he would have otherwise been forced to stay with Mrs. Figg, a strange old lady who owned several dozen cats. The first night he had stayed over, Lisa had them staying up well into the night watching movies of all kinds—mostly Disney movies—and the two of them had fallen asleep on the couch together.

That was also the first time he had woken up to find Mrs. Crawft taking snap shots of him and Lisa, to frame them on a wall that had many other pictures of Lisa—mostly baby picture—which she showed to her guests.

Lisa had never been more embarrassed in her life, or so she always told him.

Harry noticed that someone had put a blanket over them sometime during the night. He suspected Lisa's mum to be the culprit as the television had also been turned off.

Thinking of how Mrs. Crawft had most likely come in last night to cover them with a blanket reminded him of how he had been convinced to stay over for the night by Lisa. Yesterday had been the last day before he left for Hogwarts, which he had told the Crawft's was a very prominent boarding school in Scotland.

They had accepted his words without question—Harry suspected magic was involved somehow—and his friend had all but demanded he stay with them for the night. The two of them had then proceeded to stay up late watching movies, before falling asleep together on the couch like when they were younger.

Harry had to admit that even to this day he was not sure how he felt about waking up to find himself being used as a giant teddy bear. Uncomfortable because of how close this girl was and how deceptively strong her grip seemed, or warm because this girl, who was the closest thing he had to a sister, cared for him so much that she would stay up late just to be with him for as long as possible before he went to

Hogwarts. He supposed it was a mixture of both.

Harry carefully shifted in the girl's grip, ignoring the way her arms tightened against him, then proceeded to gently tap certain points on her wrists and arms. The pressure points he touched caused Lisa's hold on him to loosen, and he swiftly removed himself out from under her and replaced his body with a pillow. Lisa frowned for a moment, no doubt sensing the lack of warmth the pillow emitted, but thankfully didn't wake up and just buried her face into the sack of feathers.

The first thing Harry decided to do after escaping was take a quick shower. Having stayed over at the Crawft's many times in the last three years, he had grown comfortable enough to use their facilities. These days Harry was practically considered a member of the family—even if Mr. Crawft didn't like him all that much due to how close he was to their daughter.

Absently, he wondered why Mr. Crawft disliked him so, but shrugged the thought off as the man just being an overprotective father. He had read about how some father's could get very protective of their children, especially their daughter's, though he couldn't for the life of him understand why. He would never hurt Lisa. Surely Mr. Crawft knew that.

Harry spent a good long while under the hot spray of the shower before actually cleaning himself off. By the time he was clothed it was nearing six a.m.. He could hear the sizzling of the stove and caught the scent of bacon wafting along the air. Lisa's mum was awake and cooking breakfast.

Moving into the living room, Harry saw that Lisa still had yet to wake up. The girl had changed positions and was now laying on her back. The blanket had been thrown off at some point while he'd been in the shower, and one of her legs was dangling off the couch, while the other was raised up on the couch's arm. Likewise, her left arm hung off the couch while her right lay at a slightly awkward angle behind her head.

With a shake of his head, Harry walked past the couch and into the kitchen/dining room where he found Mrs. Crawft cooking what he had already deduced from the smell to be bacon, eggs and hash browns.

"Good morning, Mrs. Crawft," Harry greeted amicably as he walked up to her. "Do you need any help?"

"Good morning, Harry," Mrs. Crawft said with a smile. She did not seem surprised to find him in her kitchen at such an early hour asking if she needed help. Why should she? This particular scene had occurred so regularly whenever Harry slept over that it was practically tradition.

The smile soon turned into a pout, and Harry didn't even need to guess to know what was coming.

"Though I do wish you would stop calling me Mrs. Crawft. It makes me feel so old. Perhaps you call me Anastasia." The smile returned with a vengeance, only this time there was a teasing glint to it. "Or better yet, why don't you call me mum?"

And there it was. This was not the first time Lisa's mother had suggested he call her mum, and it would most definitely not be the last either. Within the last year alone, Anastasia had asked him to call her mum exactly 652 times, which was exactly 16 times more than last year. She seemed to be increasing the amount of times she asked him to call her mum every year since they had met—he suspected her reason was due to his less than desirable living conditions.

Harry resisted the urge to sigh. He didn't dislike Mrs. Crawft. Truth be told he was very fond of her. She was everything a mother should be in his opinion; kind and compassionate, yet also firm when needed, and wise in certain aspects of life. She also had a slightly mischievous side that came out quite often. Just seeing how Lisa had turned out showed how well the woman was at raising her child. He had great respect for the woman's abilities as a mother and truly appreciated the hospitality and acceptance she had shown him.

The problem was that Anastasia was not his mother. His mother had died tragically, nobly sacrificing her life to protect his. It didn't matter that he had only known his mum for a year; that year had been more than enough time that no one could replace Lily Evans in his heart. He loved his mother, for the life she had given him, a life he would not have were it not for her. Mrs. Crawft could not compete with that, no matter how much

he liked her.

Still, that didn't mean he was going to be rude. Even if Anastasia Crawft was being serious and not just jesting, he did like and even appreciate her attempts.

"So, do you need any help with breakfast?"

Mrs. Crawft huffed a bit as Harry changed the subject, but decided not to call him out on it and instead went back to scrambling eggs. "Breakfast is almost ready so I don't really need any help here, but if you could set the table, that would be nice."

"Very well."

Harry knew where all the plates and utensils were, and he quickly and efficiently gathered the plates, forks, knives, and cups, and began arranging them on the table with four people in mind.

"Harry," Anastasia called to him. He looked over to see that she hadn't turned from her self-appointed task as she spoke. "I'm going to start putting breakfast on the table. When you finish setting the table, could you please go and wake up Lisa?"

"Sure," Harry replied, and after he finished his task made his way into the living where Lisa was still sleeping heavily on the couch. He noticed with some amusement that the girl's mouth was wide open and she had a small trickle of drool escaping the left corner of her mouth.

Harry knelt down next to the girl and began to gently shake her. "Lisa, it's time to get up." Despite his attempts it took a while before his friend actually began to stir. Lisa had always been a heavy sleeper. Her mother had once joked that the world could come to an end and she would probably sleep through it.

"Mmmmgggggg..." Lisa let out a long, drawn out groan as her eyes began to open blearily. She was forced to shut them almost as soon as she opened them due to the light hitting her face. "Could someone turn that light off?" she asked, her voice coarse from disuse and sleepiness.

"Unfortunately the light you're talking about just so happens to be the sun," Harry informed the girl. "Which, by the way, is impossible to turn off."

Lisa just groaned some more, turned onto her side, and tried to go back to sleep. Harry frowned as he realized that his friend was going to be stubborn this morning, and decided that more drastic measures were needed to wake her. Reaching out, he grabbed her side and gave it a light pinch.

This action earned a loud squeal from Lisa, who shot into a sitting position and jerked away from Harry. She rubbed the spot where Harry pinched her, glaring at the boy in question, who could only watch her in amusement.

"Breakfast is almost ready," he told her without preamble. "Your mum asked me to wake you up."

"Did you have to pinch me?" Lisa asked with a grumble.

"I probably could have found another way to wake you," Harry admitted with a shrug. "But this was the most expedient method." Lisa tossed him a glare. Harry matched her glare with a smile so bright it had to be fake. After a moment his friend grumbled about good for nothing best friends, causing him to chuckle.

"Did you wake my daughter up yet, Harry?" Anastasia asked as she stuck her head out of the kitchen door. "I thought I heard her squealing."

"I was not squealing!" Lisa said with a huff as her cheeks took on a slight red tint.

"Yes, she's awake now," Harry told the mother of his best friend. Standing up, he offered his hand to Lisa who, after several seconds of glaring at it, took the proffered hand and allowed him to pull her up.

They walked into the dining room to see that Mrs. Crawft had already put all of the food on the table. Both of them moved to what was essentially their assigned seats, Harry near the head of the table on the left side and Lisa right next to him.

"No need to stand on ceremony, you two," Mrs. Crawft said as she moved around the counter that separated the dining room from the kitchen, a pitcher of orange juice in hand. She filled their glasses with the freshly made beverage and beamed at them. "Dig in."

Not needing to be told twice, Lisa was quick to grab the large spoon stuck in the bowl of eggs and serve herself up. Harry shook his head at his friends enthusiasm, and decided to help her out a bit by setting several pieces of bacon and a serving of hash browns on her plate. When finished, he served himself with a much larger serving of food that had Lisa shaking her head at him in turn.

"I don't know how you can eat so much," she mumbled as she gave his plate the evil eye. "Especially when you're so tiny."

"I'm taller than you are," Harry grumbled. It was true that he was technically thin. While his body was layered with muscles that really had no right existing on one so young, they would never be very big. He just wasn't built that way.

"Besides, with all the exercise I do, as well as my martial arts and football, I burn a lot of energy. I need more food than you to keep my body going." There was another reason for his need to eat more, he believed. But it was something of an untested theory, and definitely not something he could tell Lisa or her parents, even if he did manage to find ample evidence to support it.

"Right, right." Lisa rolled her eyes as she took a fork full of eggs and put it on her mouth, chewing carefully before swallowing. "And just what do you think I do when I go to my dance classes? Sit there like a lemon and watch everybody else dance?"

"You're smaller than me," Harry argued, "much smaller than me. And I didn't say you were lazy. Plus, I'm a male. Generally speaking, the male body requires more sustenance than the female body. The theory is that..."

"I don't need to hear your technobabble," Lisa interrupted him, causing Harry to shrug indifferently.

"Then you shouldn't have said anything." Lisa grunted, but didn't reply as she turned fully to the task of eating. This kind of banter was nothing new. More often than not he and Lisa would trade barbs back and forth when they weren't engrossed in something both of them enjoyed. However, it rarely happened when they were eating sans dinner.

Harry knew why she was doing it, of course, and couldn't begrudge her for it. He felt much the same way she did. And so when she grew silent, he started up on another subject, forcing her to speak some more while they ate.

Sitting farther away at the other end of the table, Mrs. Crawft watched them with a sad smile.

The banter between the pair was interrupted when the door to the dining room opened and Mr. Crawft walked in.

Daniel Anderson Crawft was a tall man, much taller than most people Harry had run across. His dark raven hair with flecks of gray was cut to just below the chin and slicked back, giving him stylish yet professional appearance. Like his hair, his eyes were very dark. They were brown, but almost looked black.

He was also in decent shape for a man of forty, with a build that, while not athletic, was at least fit. Despite his age he looked rather young. The only signs of him getting up there in years being the distinguished looking gray hairs and the small age lines around his mouth and eyes.

"Ann, Lisa... Harry," he greeted as he marched into the room, straightening the tie to his business suit. Harry didn't miss the hesitation in the man's tone when greeting him. He was well aware Mr. Crawft didn't approve of how close he and Lisa were and it showed. The only reason he didn't say anything against Harry was because both Lisa and his wife would become cross with him if he did.

Daniel Crawft was a rather prominent business man, a manager at HSBC Holdings, and was very successful when it came to investing money in the stock market. It was actually thanks to him overhearing Mr. Crawft speaking with his wife about some of his investments that had gotten Harry interested in learning how to properly invest his money in the first

place—not that he ever had enough money to invest until now. He was a business man through and through and, in Harry's opinion, not a very good dad.

That was not to say that Harry thought the man didn't care for his daughter, or that he was a bad person. Just that he focused more on his work than he did his family. The few times he did focus on Lisa was when they were having a... difference of opinion, which they had quite often, as Harry could attest to.

It was only during dinner that Mr. Crawft actually acted like a father towards Lisa, and Harry was almost positive that Mrs. Crawft was the largest reason for that. The woman could be quite persuasive when she wanted to be.

"Off to work so soon, dear?" asked Mrs. Crawft, pouting a bit as she watched the man grab a cup of coffee and a piece of toast from the toaster. This was as much tradition as her's and Harry's 'call me mum' moments. "And I went through all this trouble preparing a large breakfast to see Harry off before he goes to that boarding school, too."

"Sorry," Daniel replied, though Harry already knew the man wasn't. If anything, he was most likely relieved Harry was leaving.

Beside him, Lisa stiffened at the mention of Harry's school. He did his best to ignore that right now, knowing that bringing it up would only make the current situation worse.

The man of the house looked at him and inclined his head. "Good luck at your new school."

Well, at least that had been a sincere statement. If nothing else, Harry could count on the fact that, while Mr. Crawft may not like how close Harry was to Lisa, he at least respected him for his intelligence and drive.

"Thank you," Harry returned as Lisa's father kissed his wife on the cheek, before taking his leave.

Breakfast finished fairly quickly after that, and before long, Harry found himself standing in front of the doorway while Lisa and her mother stood

in front of him.

"Are you sure you don't want me driving you to your relatives, Harry?" Mrs. Crawft asked him. Harry shook his head.

"It's fine," he said, "I don't have to be at the train station until ten, and it's still only eight thirty."

Mrs. Crawft sighed, but didn't argue with him. "Very well. I know you like your independence when it comes to these things." She leaned down and gave Harry a tight hug, which, after a moment, was returned. "Good luck at school. We'll miss seeing you around here."

"Likewise," Harry replied softly.

When the mother of one released her hold on him and backed away, Lisa walked up to him and stopped just short of being able to touch him. She bit her lower lip, and Harry could already see the tears barely contained in her eyes.

He knew this would be hard on her. Lisa had been his best friend for years; they had done practically everything together. Well, almost everything, and the idea that he wouldn't be around for an extended period of time no doubt hurt her.

Suddenly, Harry wasn't so sure going to Hogwarts was a good idea anymore. For a moment, he was tempted to forget about learning magic, if it would keep the only person he'd ever been close to from feeling so sad. Just looking at the girl as she tried not to cry made him feel like someone was trying to tear his heart out of his chest.

However, the feeling only lasted for a moment, before he strengthened his resolve. He *needed* to do this. Not just because of he was a wizard, but because of his parents. They had spoken of Hogwarts so much when he was younger, about how amazing it was. The joy in their voices had been undeniable when they spoke fondly of their times at the school of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry wanted to follow in their footsteps, to make them proud by becoming the greatest, most powerful wizard in the entire world. He couldn't do that if he stayed here.

In a rare display of open affection, Harry moved forward and initiated their hug. While he had never denied the girl physical affection—indeed, he probably allowed her to be more physically intimate with him than was proper for children their age—he rarely ever initiated such instances. He would go along with her because she meant so much to him, but it was always Lisa who started any contact between them.

If she was surprised by the contact she did not show it. She returned his hug fiercely, her arms wound tightly around his torso and she buried her face in the crook of his neck, while one of his hands slowly stroked her hair and the other rested against her back.

"Promise you'll write to me?" she croaked, and Harry could feel a few tears hitting the bare skin of his neck. He felt a moment of intense guilt threatening to overwhelm him, but reigned in it.

He also managed to reign in the suspicious moisture that gathered in his eyes. He would not allow himself to show weakness by crying. Especially not when his friend needed him to be strong.

"I promise," he whispered. He had actually spent quite a bit of time making sure that it would be possible to send her letters. He couldn't send Hedwig to her. While that wasn't quite breaking the law or jeopardizing the secrecy of magic, it would cause a lot of unwanted questions to be asked.

Fortunately, there was a way to send letters to non-magical people via the wizarding post office. Harry didn't know the mechanics behind it, but knew they had a way of transferring letters to a regular post office using some kind of magic. While it would be interesting to study at some point, at that moment, the only thing he really cared about was that it meant he could send letter's to Lisa.

"Everyday."

He chuckled, though it was lacking any humor. "I'll see what I can do."

Harry could feel her nod against his neck. For a moment, no one spoke, and the only sound were the small snuffles coming from the girl in his arms.

"I'll miss you."

Harry's arms tightened around the girl who was a sister in all but blood. Why was this so much harder than he thought it would be?

"And I you."

He carefully loosened his hold on the girl, his hands going to her shoulders. He pushed her back a bit, forcing her to let go of him. Giving the girl a small smile, Harry gently wiped the few tears that had fallen from her eyes.

"Try not to be too depressed, ok?" he said, trying to give her a smile he didn't feel. "I know it seems like a long time, but it won't be forever. I still get Christmas off, and I'll see you then."

"It seems like it's going to be forever," Lisa muttered, and Harry looked away uncomfortably. He wished he could make her feel better, wished he could say or do something to assure her that everything would be all right. That he could take away all the pain she was feeling, but there was nothing he could think of that would help in a situation like this.

Because even with all knowledge Harry gained, there were some things that you just couldn't learn from a book.

Because sometimes, the only way to learn is through first hand experience.

And unfortunately for Harry, this was one situation he had never been in before, and so all he could do was hope that things would get better with time.

The moment Harry arrived home, he received the very expected summons from his uncle.

"Boy!"

Sighing, Harry made his way into the living room where his uncle sat watching television. Over at the table, Dudley was scarfing down food like it would disappear if he ate too slowly, and Petunia flitted around her son

heaping praises on how adorable he looked in his school uniform. It was a sight that Harry only spared a brief glance towards before focusing on Vernon.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon?"

The walrus of a man released a brief grunt, not bothering to look away from the news channel he was watching.

"Spending time at that trollop's house again, were you?"

Harry's fingers twitched as the desire to blast Vernon through a wall for insulting his best friend nearly overpowered him. He resisted, but only just.

The man seemed to be getting bold now that the day for Harry to leave had finally come. Harry could only hope Vernon Dursley would not be completely insufferable during the trip to King's Cross. At the moment, he wasn't all that sure if he could hold himself back from reacting violently. He still felt the keen ache from his goodbye to Lisa.

"What time do you need to leave?"

"As soon as I get packed we can go," Harry answered.

Vernon grunted. "Then hurry up. I don't have all day. I need to be at work soon."

Harry nodded, resisting the urge to roll his eyes, and made his way upstairs. As he closed the door to his room, he sank down to the floor using the wall to support his back and sat on his butt.

This day had started off much worse than he had initially expected. Everything was more difficult than he had assumed it would be. He had known that leaving his best friend would be hard, but he hadn't been prepared for how much it would hurt. His emotions felt raw, as if someone had peeled his carefully crafted defenses and then poured the proverbial salt over his open wounds. It was so bad that he had very nearly used his magic on his Uncle, something he had not done since he was seven.

Needing a moment to center himself, Harry forced himself to go through some light breathing exercises. It would not do for him to be an emotional wreck when he arrived at the Hogwarts Express. He needed to present an image of strength. He could ill afford to be seen as weak.

Thankfully, he had grown accustomed to meditating and didn't need much time to clear his mind and regain control over his emotions. It only took five minutes at the most, though it was the longest five minutes of his life.

His eyes were forced open when a pair of clawed feet landed on his left knee and a hoot garnered his attention.

"Hey, Hedwig." Harry softly stroked the snowy owl's feathers.

Hedwig gave him a hoot of concern, amber eyes staring into his green ones.

"I'm fine," he reassured her, only to yelp when she nipped his fingers hard enough to draw blood. "Ok, I'm not fine," he admitted with a sigh. "But I'll get over it, so you don't need to worry."

His reassuring smile didn't seem to work on the strange bird. Hedwig gave him a deadpanned look that somehow seemed to say 'it's when you tell me not to worry that I worry the most.'

Harry shook his head ruefully. He still wasn't sure how he could understand Hedwig so well, or how she seemed to understand him so perfectly. It was almost like they were reading each other's minds. Whatever the case was, Harry planned on looking up any information pertaining to their situation when he got to Hogwarts.

"I'm being serious, you don't need to worry about me," he told Hedwig as he used his magic to make the blood on his finger disappear. The wound had already healed over. "Change like this is always difficult at first, but I've read that the pain will eventually fade. And it's not like I won't be seeing Lisa again. You know what they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Hedwig gave a hoot before flying off Harry's knee, allowing the young

raven-haired boy to stand and begin gathering his belongings.

His trunk was already prepared; he had taken care of packing it two nights ago. All of his books were put away. Well, almost all of them. He did want some reading materials for the train ride to school.

His clothes were neatly folded and organized in the compartment he had made specifically for them, and the few possessions he wished to take with him were all packed up as well. There were only three items left that he needed to grab.

"Do you want to come with me when I get on the Hogwarts Express?" asked Harry as he moved over to his desk. "Or are you going to fly there on your own?"

Hedwig tilted her head from side to side in slightly jerky movements. Harry waited as his owl pondered the question posed. After a moment, she gave a hoot.

"Alright then." With a small gesture of his hand the window to his room opened up, allowing a small breeze to blow through. "Be safe while flying, I hear traffic's rough this time of year." Hedwig gave what pretty much amounted to an eye roll at his horrible joke, and with an affectionate nip of his ear, took off through the now open window.

The window closed behind the owl as if on it's own accord, and Harry grabbed one of the two items he had decided not to pack in his trunk. The item in question looked like two small straps of leather that ran parallel to each other, and were attached together by a small 'pocket' about as wide as his finger. Sitting inside the pocket was his mother's wand.

Leaning down Harry undid the clasp and attached the wand holster containing the willow wand to his left ankle. He watched with a smile as it's form shimmered in the light before wand and holster vanished. Truly, magic was a wonderful thing.

The next object was another wand holster, only this one looked much different than the other one. This particular holster had a small slice of leather for the wand to slide into, though it was nearly two-thirds longer,

quite a bit wider, and was shaped like a rectangle, possessing a hard casing instead of the softer and pliable material used in the creation of the holster holding his mother's wand. This was because of the catch located near the front of the opening which, when released, would cause his wand to shoot into his hand. It was called a dueling holster, for obvious reasons, and Harry had spent much time simply practicing the motions of releasing and reloading his wand until he could do it with the same economy of motion used in hand-to-hand combat.

Carefully, he slid the holster around the wrist of his right forearm, then tightened the leather straps that kept it attached, and slid the sleeves of his long-sleeved shirt over the holster until just the tip poked out. With swift and sure movements, he released the catch, allowing the wand to shoot out at startling speeds. He caught it, and a smile came to his face as he looked at the wand that Ollivander had told him was his greatest work.

XoX

It was about a week after the first time he had been to Diagon Alley that he received a letter from Ollivander informing him that his wand was ready. As Harry entered the store, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. The magic of this place was much more heady than the last time he had spent here, more potent. He wondered if there was a reason for this, but put the thought out of his mind and walked into the shop.

"Ah, Mr. Potter." Ollivander did not appear behind him this time, but rather, walked out from the door near the back. He looked tired, Harry noted. There were bags under his eyes, and his posture was stooped. Despite that, he also seemed very pleased with himself. The reasons of which soon became clear. "It is good that you are here, I have your wand all ready for you."

From within the old man's robes, Ollivander produced a simple black box. Harry waited on baited breath as the old man with silvery eyes opened it.

When the lid was pulled off, Harry saw his wand lying on top of a plush purple pillow reminiscent of satin. The wand was light brown, long, with a spiral pattern starting from the tip of the wand and moving down before it

reached the handle, which was thicker than the rest by a few centimeters and had notched grooves Harry recognized were for his fingers.

Harry found himself transfixed on the wand as Ollivander moved closer. "Thirteen inches, made from the wood of an elder tree."

Elder tree, a rare tree found only in the most inhospitable regions. The wood from one made excellent wands, but was rarely every used due to their scarcity.

Ollivander continued. "Dual wand cores are used as the focus: the heartstrings of a Griffin, willingly given to my many times great grandfather. It has been dusted in ground dragon scales from a dragon whose very legend has transcended time, Odahviing." Ollivander's eyes held an intensity that Harry had yet to see in the man as he spoke. "This wand is powerful, very powerful, but also incomplete."

"Incomplete?" Harry's attention snapped away from the wand that lay in the box. As he looked at the old wand maker, his brow furrowed. Why would Ollivander call him here to inform him that his wand was ready if it had yet to be finished? Unless... "You need me to finish it."

"Indeed," Ollivander said, seemingly delighted that Harry had figured it out so quickly. "The three components I have used for this wand are all very powerful, incredibly so, but because of that, they are also unstable when used together. This wand cannot be used safely unless I have a powerful catalyst that can bind the wood and two cores together."

"Blood," Harry answered again. It was the only logical conclusion he could come to. Blood had power. There was a reason purebloods believed themselves superior to muggleborns, regardless of their inaccurate beliefs on heredity. "You need my blood. How much?"

"Enough to fill this vial," Ollivander held up a small tube-like vial about six inches in length and half an inch in circumference. Harry took it from the wand maker, and held it aloft to his eyes.

"I assume you have something I can cut myself with?" His question was answered when Ollivander produced a gleaming white dagger that shone in the light. Taking it from the wand maker, Harry sliced open the vein in

his wrist and held the wound to the vial's opening as blood gushed out. When it was full, Ollivander healed the wound before Harry's magic could do the job, and took the vial from him.

"It will take me about an hour to perform the ritual that will bind the wand's materials to your blood," Ollivander told him. "You may wait right here, or come back later today."

"I think I'll wait here," Harry informed the wand maker, and with that he walked over to the spindly chair, sat down, and pulled out a book on potions from within his robes.

In turn, Ollivander flicked his wand at the door, changing the sign from open to close, and walked back through the door at the end of the room.

It was only half an hour later that Harry was forced to stop reading when the power coming from behind the closed door forced his attention off his book. Like a jolt of electricity racing across his skin, Harry could feel the magic in the air like an electric current. The atmosphere became filled with the heady scent of ozone, as if the magics within the shop were actually beginning to burn the stale air due to its potency.

Whatever ritual Ollivander was doing, it must be very powerful, Harry concluded.

The power surge lasted for a total of fifteen minutes before diminishing, and in another five it dwindled down to nothing. Harry stowed his book away and rose from his seat just as an exhausted yet elated Ollivander walked into the room.

"It is finished," the old wand maker said, once more presenting Harry with the wand sitting in the box. It did not look that different from the last time he had seen, save for one exception.

Moving from the tip of the spire, down into the handle where they abruptly stopped, were ancient looking symbols that he recognized as Norse and Anglo-Saxon runes. He saw Sowilo, the same rune that was carved onto his forehead and was associated with the god Baldur. There was also Uruz, corresponding to the god Thor and a symbol of mental and physical strength. Harry could see many others that he recognized from his

studies of ancient Norse history; Naudiz, the rune of necessity. Tiwaz, the warriors rune. Ehwaz, the rune of momentum. Ihwaz, the rune of defense. Jera, the rune of success and continuity, and Dagaz, the rune of transformation. They moved along the spire, tiny black symbols of ancient runic language that continued in a string of combinations.

Harry had no idea what these runes meant from a magical stand point. He had only ever studied them from a historical standpoint, but he knew that these symbols of old had been written in his blood and soaked so thoroughly into the wand that they had become a part of the very grain of the wood.

"Go on." Ollivander gestured with the box, his voice a breathy whisper. "Take it."

Harry reached out, his fingers found purchase in the notched grooves of the wands handle, and he grasped it tightly.

A gasp escape his lips as a powerful current of energy surged through him. The runic symbols running along the wand's spire glowed a bright silvery green. Harry's eyes closed, and his body shuddered as his magic began to sing in harmony with the wood and twin cores.

He could feel them. He could feel the twin cores harmonizing themselves with him and the wood that made up his wand. He could feel the elder wood synchronizing itself with the cores and himself, becoming one with him in ways he had never in his wildest dreams imagined possible. It felt like a part of his soul was being restored to him, like a piece of him that had been missing for so long he never knew it was gone had suddenly come back. It was impossible for him to tell where he ended and the wand began.

If he had to sum up how he felt in a single word, it would be complete.

Harry opened his eyes and Ollivander actually took a step back in shock. His eyes were burning with emerald green fire, and the outer edges of the iris were lined with silver. The colorful irises bathed the room in light. His pupils were gone—no. Not gone. They had been replaced. The once black dots were now a bright silvery green that was only visible if one looked very hard.

The glow in Harry's eyes soon died down, and the power seemed to... not quite diminish, but more like it simply decided not to manifest itself for any longer. It disappeared within Harry and the wand, thrumming beneath the surface as it waited eagerly to be released again.

"That wand you have there is very powerful, Mr. Potter," Ollivander said softly. "It is the most powerful wand I have made to date, and now it will only ever work with you. No one else will ever be able to use it. Your wand is also unique."

"Unique how?" asked Harry, looking from his wand to Ollivander.

"Due to the way I had to use your blood as the catalyst that bound the cores to the wood, the wand has become intimately tied to you and you alone. Your growth as a wizard will be reflected by your wand. Whatever magics you excel in, your wand will be able to accomplish with ease. If you were to become a master in every single branch of magic, then your wand will excel in every single branch of magic. On the other hand, if you excelled at nothing, your wand will excel at nothing."

Ollivander gave him a slight smile.

"However, I believe that the latter case will prove unfounded. I expect great things from you, Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled at the man who had given him what was quite possibly the best gift anyone ever had, the lost piece of himself that he had never known was missing.

"I'll be sure not to disappoint."

XoX

"BOY!" A shout from Harry's uncle interrupted the raven-haired youth's musings. "You'd better be down in five seconds or I'm leaving without you!"

Sighing, Harry made sure both wands were in place and that the holsters were secure, then grabbed his trunk and made his way out of the room.

He came downstairs to see Vernon Dursleys, his face the color of puce, glaring at him behind his bristly mustaches.

"About time you got down here," he grunted to Harry. "Well, get a move on. I don't have all day."

His uncle must be feeling awfully bold to talk to him like that. Normally, the man would just ignore Harry to the best of his ability. It probably had something to do with the fact that they would not be seeing each other for nine months.

Harry dismissed those thoughts. It's not like it truly mattered. He would be out of their hair and they would be out of his soon enough.

"Very well, Uncle Vernon," Harry replied as he moved to the car, his trunk rolling behind him.

The trip to King's Cross was long. About an hour all told. Harry sat in the back of the car so he wouldn't have to deal with his uncle glaring at him, reading a book on magical theory.

He normally would've taken amusement in how twitchy his walrus of an uncle got at seeing the book, but right now he just wasn't feeling it. In fact, he wasn't feeling much of anything. Something he attributed to his recent inner turmoil from his goodbye with Lisa.

When they arrived at the train station, Harry got out, grabbed his trunk, and watched as Vernon sped off without even so much as a good bye.

Yes, the man truly wanted nothing more than getting Harry out of his presence for good.

Turning, Harry made his way into the train station. The place was very packed, with hundreds of people jostling their way through the crowded walkways. Considering how many people used the trains to get to work, it was to be expected, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

Harry wove between the crowd, making his way towards the platforms of nine and ten. His destination was marked by a big plastic number over platform nine, and another big plastic number over platform ten. There

was nothing in the middle, nothing that could be seen at least.

It was not hard for one attuned with magic to sense the tendrils of energy coming from the dividing barrier between platforms nine and ten. There was most definitely something there. An illusion? A gateway, perhaps? It was hard to tell, but Harry knew that in order to get to platform nine and three-quarters, all he had to do was walk through the divide between the two barriers.

Taking a deep breath, Harry attempted to center himself, preparing for the journey that would make his parents proud. His journey to greatness. To become the greatest wizard this world had ever and would ever see.

I hope you all enjoyed this previous chapter. I tried to show that for all his intelligence and maturity, Harry is still an eleven year old boy and as such has all of the feelings an eleven year old would have when it came to leaving their best friend for such an extended period of time. In either event the wait is now over. The next chapter will be Harry's time on the Hogwarts Express.

Bon Voyage!

The Hogwarts Express

The Hogwarts Express

Passing through the barrier that led to platform nine and three-quarters was an experience in and of itself. It felt like his body was being hit with a very mild electric current, not enough to be painful or even uncomfortable, but enough that the hairs on the back of his neck and arms stood on end. It was a most unusual experience.

While most people would never think twice about something like this—at least he assumed none of the witches and wizards who passed through here did—Harry couldn't help but wonder at the barrier. What was it? How was it made? Was it a gateway? Some kind of passage that warped the boundaries of time and space to instantaneously take one to their destination? Or was it something as simple as an illusion that had been placed over the platform to hide it from the non-magical population? Harry promised himself that he would eventually find out and replicate the feat someday.

The feeling of amazement and wonder at the magical barrier soon left him when something else caused him to look around in awe.

On the other side of the barrier, signified by a large plastic sign, was platform nine and three-quarters. Everywhere he looked witches and wizards milled about, filling nearly every nook and cranny of space available. Families were giving tearful goodbyes to sons and daughters, and many friends who looked to be returning students chatted with each other excitedly.

Animals of all kinds roamed the platform as well. Harry saw everything from owls hooting in their cages, to cats prowling around the legs of people, and even tiny mice darting to and fro—some to try and get away from the cats—underneath the legs of students and parents alike. And sitting behind it all was a massive scarlet and gold steam engine many of the students were boarding, and a few already had and were poking their heads out of the windows to speak with their parents.

After taking a moment to take the sight in, Harry lifted his trunk, which now had a feather-light charm to make carrying it easier, over his shoulder and started off towards the train. He wove in between several people, gracefully sidestepping a pair of students, first years from the looks of them, that had nearly run into him. It wasn't long before he boarded the train, and after searching through the isles for an unoccupied compartment found one that he quickly entered.

Setting the trunk down on the floor, Harry smiled as he pressed the catch on his wand holster. The wand shot out, and in a smooth, practiced motion, he caught it by the handle, his fingers already resting within the grooves. As soon as his fingers were clasped around it fully, the runes on the wand started to glow a silvery green. The glow was very dull however, nowhere near as bright as when he had first gotten it. In fact, most would probably play it off as a trick of the light.

Harry was thankful for this, as he didn't want people asking questions about his wand when they saw it.

Pointing his wand at the trunk, he watched, his smile growing brighter by the minute, as it began to lift itself into the air. Using his wand to guide the trunk's movements, he carefully stowed it in the compartment above the seats. He then sat down and reached into his pocket, where he pulled out a small book the size of his palm. A small wave of his wand later, and the book on magical theory enlarged to its normal size and Harry began reading.

As his eyes wove their way across the pages, memorizing everything they saw, his mind began wondering about the school he was going to, and the small part of him that was nothing more than an eleven year old boy couldn't help but feel excited about the coming school year.

What would he learn when he got to Hogwarts? What would his classes be like? What were the teachers like? The other students? Would he make any friends?...

...

He frowned a bit at that last thought, even as his fingers absently turned a page. Harry couldn't help but wonder where that thought had come

from. He had never really been interested in making friends. Back when he was at the muggle school he hadn't seen any point in doing so. There simply hadn't been any benefit in befriending someone when he would eventually be living in a completely different world from them anyway.

That was not to say Harry was a loner. At first, he may have been, but about a month or two after Lisa had stormed her way into his life with all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop, many of his peers began looking up to him. He guessed seeing him with Lisa made him seem more approachable. And while he still didn't particularly care for any of those people, Harry would not deny he enjoyed the admiration and respect they afforded him.

It had also helped him learn to interact with others. He knew that intelligence could only get one so far. If you didn't know how to talk to people, how would you get a good job? How would you make your mark on the world? How could you gain allies willing to rally behind you when you tried to make said mark? The answer was you couldn't. Thus, Harry had thrown himself into becoming someone the other students looked up to and admired, the kind of guy you wouldn't hesitate to come up to and ask for help or advice, be it for something as simple as school, or more complex problems dealing with life issues.

But now that he was going to a school where he would be meeting people like him, perhaps it would be a good idea to have friends. Real friends. People he could actually share things with, who would stand by him not because he was a leader they were rallying behind, but because they actually cared about him.

It was a childish thought, and Harry felt a bit embarrassed to even be thinking it, but could not deny that the idea to have real friends was appealing. Because as much as he may love Lisa as the sister he never had, the simple fact of the matter was that she was not a witch. She knew nothing of magic, and as much as he wished he could inform her of its existence, knew that telling her, at least for now, would cause problems.

"Mom—geroff!"

A shout was heard over the din of noise from outside and drew Harry's

attention to what looked like a rather large family of red heads. There were five in total: a plump woman with a pleasant smile on her face and motherly air about her, two older boys who looked like identical twins, a girl who looked to be around a year younger than Harry himself, and what Harry assumed was the source of the voice, a boy that looked to be around his age. He was very tall, maybe even an inch to two taller than Harry, and gangly. He had large hands and feet that looked slightly out of place on his body, and a long nose. Like the others, he too had bright red hair several shades lighter than Harry's mother's.

One of the things Harry noticed about the entire family straight from the get-go was that they seemed rather poorly off. The robes the three boys wore were worn and slightly ragged, probably second hand robes, and the trunks they were carried looked just as old. The family was probably having financial troubles. With so many kids, Harry could see why.

"Aaah, has ickle Ronnie got somefink on his nose?" asked one of the twins in a teasing voice. Definitely older brothers, Harry concluded, remembering how he had once read that older brothers often tend to tease their younger siblings. It was actually part of the reason he sometimes teased Lisa, because even if they weren't related, he wanted that brotherly feeling for himself.

"Shut up," the one Harry now knew as Ron grouched. At that point Harry decided to stop listening—it was very rude to spy on people having what looked like a personal conversation between family, after all, and he didn't want to be like Petunia—and returned to his reading. To help with this, because even if he wasn't looking he could still hear every word being said, he put up a very basic spell on the window that muffled the voices outside. It wouldn't silence them, but it would at least make sure Harry couldn't understand what they were saying.

It was several minutes after he had put up the muffling spell that the train started to move. Out of curiosity, he looked out the window again to see the mother of the boys waving, and the sister half-laughing, half-crying as she ran alongside the train.

For just a moment, Harry's mind superimposed an image of Lisa over the red-haired girl, and he once more felt the sting of unshed tears in his

eyes. Gritting his teeth, he quickly looked away and was once more forced to meditate in order to calm down.

Leaving Lisa really was hitting him much harder than he thought it would. It seemed that, for all the preparing he had done to make his leaving easier, none of it had worked. Even now he felt an immense sense of loss, a gap in his heart where Lisa's presence had once been, and even the knowledge that he would see her during Christmas didn't seem to help.

Harry really didn't like this feeling of loss. It made him feel weak, and he had no clue how to fix it. He only hoped this terrible feeling in his heart would fade soon. He wouldn't be able to accomplish anything if he was busy mourning the loss of Lisa's presence; a loss that was only temporary.

The door to his compartment slid open and Harry's head snapped up to see the youngest son of the redheaded family walk in.

"Anyone sitting there?" he asked, pointing at the seat opposite of Harry. "Everywhere else is full?"

"Help yourself," Harry said with a small gesture towards the seat, actually glad that someone had decided to sit with him. If nothing else, the red-haired boy would prove an able distraction from his depressing thoughts.

Ron sat down. Harry absently finished the page in his book, and closed it without marking the page number down. It wasn't like he needed to do so to remember where he left off.

He then turned to look at the redhead, who kept giving him curious glances before looking away, and opened his mouth to greet his fellow first year when the door to the compartment suddenly sprung open.

"Hey, Ron," one of the twins that had just barged into the room started. "Listen, we're going down to the middle of the train—Lee Jordan's got a giant tarantula down there."

Ron shuddered, "right."

The two twins then turned to Harry, a curious glint in their eyes.

"And who is this?" the other one asked.

For a moment, Harry thought about giving them a false name. He had no real desire to have what happened in the Leaky Cauldron happen here, even if it was on a much smaller scale. But he knew that if he did give a false name, he wouldn't really engender himself to them. Lying to people never did. And Harry hated lying anyway. Deciding that it was better to simply get this over with now rather than later, Harry introduced himself.

"Harry Potter."

The reaction he got was almost as comical as it was expected and annoying. Three sets of eyes widened to the proportion of dinner plates, and three jaws dropped.

"Are you really?" asked one of the older boys, the one on the left.

"As far as I know," Harry replied coolly. He wasn't really sure what to expect, granted, he'd created several plausible scenarios for what would happen when he gave people his name, but that didn't mean any of them would ring true. If there was one thing his first entrance into the wizarding world taught him, it was to expect the unexpected.

"So do you have the scar?"

Harry looked at the one on the right, George, he was sure his name was. After several seconds of staring at him intently, which Harry was pleased to note caused the boy to squirm a bit, he lifted the bangs covering his hair so they could see the lightning bolt scar on his forehead.

"Wicked," both older boys breathed as they looked at the scar that had become a symbol to the wizarding people. The younger redhead, Ron, simply stared at him with an open jaw and wide eyes.

"Well," the one on the left, Fred, Harry was sure, said. "It was awesome meeting a celebrity and all that, but George and I are going to head over to Lee's compartment."

Harry sighed in relief as the two left. That hadn't gone nearly as horribly as he imagined it would, though he was displeased to note that, despite his appearance to the contrary, he had been quite nervous. It was to be expected, after all, as the last time people learned his identity he'd been mobbed before he could even get a word in, but that didn't mean he had to enjoy this feeling of anxiousness.

"So you're really Harry Potter then?"

Blinking, Harry turned to look at the boy who had finally managed to snap out of his stupor.

"I am," Harry replied, his voice a bit less tense than it had been as he relaxed into his seat. "And you are?"

"Oh, I'm Ron, Ron Weasley," Ron introduced himself, and while Harry didn't give any reaction other than to nod, on the inside his mind was already going over everything he now knew about the boy. Or, to be more specific, it was going over everything he knew about the boy's family.

The Weasley family, according to Andromeda Tonks, was a very poor pureblood family with a lot of children. They were considered to be something of a joke amongst the more fanatical blood purists, and many of those who were considered 'dark families' felt that they were a bunch of blood-traitors, people who had betrayed the purity of their blood by consorting and sympathizing with muggles and muggleborns. On the plus side, they were a well known light-sided family firmly placed in Dumbledore's camp, and were related to the Prewett's, a now extinct yet once very powerful Ancient and Most Noble House. The Weasley Matriarch was the last of the Prewett line, from what he knew.

Harry's mind was already working out the advantages and disadvantages that would come from befriending the Weasley family. The biggest benefit, of course, was that any who associated with the Weasley's, namely, any light-sided families in Dumbledore's camp, would be on his side. The downside was that it would make getting an alliance with the so called 'darker' pureblood families very difficult.

Of course, the same could be said for gaining allegiance with one of the dark side families, something he was well aware of.

"So that scar is where..."

Harry's mind shifted gears when he heard the boy speak. He focused on Ron, who he noted with some disdain was *still* staring at where his scar was hidden by his bangs. He didn't blame the boy. Meeting Harry Potter on a train heading for school was like meeting Sean Connery in a muggle shopping center.

"Yes," Harry answered quickly in the hopes that doing so would get the boy not to ask anymore questions. Just because he understood the boy's curiosity did not mean he had any desire to sate it. The mere mention of his scar brought that night to mind, the night he had lost his parents. He had a hard enough time when he dreamed about it; he didn't want to force himself to relive it during the day.

Unfortunately, the boy did not seem to get the subtle warning in Harry's tone, for he was still gawking at the scar when he said, "Do you remember when...?"

"Are you asking me if I remember the night my parents were murdered?" asked Harry, his voice stone cold and his body stiffening in incredulity and anger. It was taking all he had not to snarl at the boy currently shrinking back in his seat.

Harry stood up and glared down at the redhead, his eyes glowing with fury and his fists shaking. While there were many things that upset him, very few could actually force their way past his carefully crafted facade. Of those things, bringing up the night his parents died was at the top of that list, as his Uncle Vernon once found out when he was thrown threw a window after stating that Harry's father was nothing but a good for nothing drunk who'd gotten him and his mother killed in a car crash. In fact, it had been that very statement that had caused Harry to become such an angry and violent person in his youth—or at least a big proponent of it.

"Where do you get the gall asking me something like that? How would you like it if *your* parents were murdered by a psychopathic killer and I asked if you remember that night?!"

By now the boy looked about to faint. His body was positively shaking,

and his face had gone white. When combined with his wide eyes, Ron looked like he might die from a heart attack.

It was only in that moment, looking at this petrified boy, that Harry realized his magic was beginning to act up. The air was heavy with the smell of ozone, and the very potent feeling of anger. It was as if his rage was manifesting itself on the physical plane.

Taking a deep breath, Harry willed his magic back down, locking it away. The feeling soon vanished, and though Ron's body relaxed slightly, he still looked quite fearful.

Harry walked towards the door, wand already in hand as he jabbed it near violently at his trunk, which floated down beside him. Jerking the door open, he looked back to say, "I would suggest you learn some tact before speaking to me again," before walking into the hallway and slamming the door shut.

Releasing the magic holding the levitation spell, Harry's trunk set itself down on the ground, and he quickly lifted it over his shoulder and began marching down the hall. Many other students looked out their compartment doors when they heard the one Harry had slammed shut, but he paid them no heed. His mind was too busy trying to calm the tide of rage he felt.

How dare that ignorant, uneducated, tactless fool ask him such a personal question! Did the boy know nothing of manners? Even a child should realize such an obviously personal and painful question should never be asked to anyone under any circumstances! It was the most foolish and rude thing anyone could ever do, and a complete and blatant violation of privacy! That boy had seriously better learn some manners before they met up again, because if he didn't, then Harry would be sure to educate him, and it would not be pleasant.

It took a moment for Harry to notice that he was losing control of his emotions. Realizing that he needed to regain his bearings, he stopped walking and set his trunk down, then leaned against the wall and clenched his eyes shut, before beginning his breathing exercises.

It took him a lot longer than he would have liked to regain control over his

anger, and he was disgusted with himself when he found that he still felt so angry. He should have better control over himself than this. He *did* have better control over himself than this. It bothered him that he seemed to be slipping back into his old self before meeting Master Wei.

Frowning, Harry dug deeper into his repertoire and used a advanced exercise for meditation, that being to find out the exact cause for his anger so he could promptly deal with it, rather than push it to the furthest recesses of his mind.

It was rather easy to realize the source of his feelings, or at least the reason why he was having so much trouble reeling them in: Lisa. Ever since their goodbye his mind had been a wreck. He kept conjuring the last image he had seen of her, shedding silent tears before running to her room, unable to look at him because of the pain his leaving brought.

Of course, that wasn't only the reason he didn't have as much control over his emotions as he should. That boy, Ron, had asked him what was quite possibly one of the few questions that truly angered him. That the red head had asked so tactlessly only added fuel to the conflagration.

It was one thing to be curious about someone who was essentially a celebrity in the wizarding world, it was quite another to allow that curiosity run rampant and bring up such horrible memories for the sake of satisfying said curiosity.

As his mind worked through his feelings, Harry's face began to relax. His scrunched eyes untensed, the crinkles surrounding them disappearing. After taking a few deep breaths, Harry let the anger he felt dissipate into the air.

"Excuse me, but are you alright?" a voice behind him asked.

Harry turned around to see a girl about his age with a lot bushy brown hair, brown eyes, and two large front teeth. She was already wearing her school robes, and seemed to carry herself with an inquisitive air. It was not hard for Harry to deduce that this girl was probably a bookworm. Currently, said bookworm's face was looking at him in mild concern.

"I'm fine," Harry told her. For a brief moment, he thought about giving the

girl a smile, but only for a moment. He didn't think himself capable of smiling for a while yet. Instead he offered the girl a calm, if slightly neutral look as he addressed her. "Can I help you with anything?"

"Oh! Um, yes," the bushy haired girl said. "You see, I was wondering if you've seen a toad anywhere. Neville's lost his."

Harry tilted his head at the name Neville. He recognized it. Both his mum and dad had mentioned that their two friends, Frank and Alice, had given birth to a son named Neville around the same time they'd had him. He wondered if this was the same Neville as the one his parents spoke of.

"I'm sorry, but I haven't seen a toad anywhere," Harry informed the girl, whose shoulders slumped. Deciding to offer her some helpful advice, he said, "might I suggest speaking to one of the prefects and asking them if he or she can use the summoning charm to summon the toad?"

The girl blinked several times, then her eyes widened. It seemed she hadn't thought of that. Mumbling a hurried 'thank you,' the girl set off to search for a prefect.

That done, Harry made his way down the hall in search of a compartment. He quickly found out that there were no empty compartments. All of them had at least two people in them, and in some cases they were filled to capacity. He passed by several such compartments in his search, before eventually finding one that would suffice.

Knocking on the door, he managed to get the attention of the two girls within the compartment. One of them was a blond haired girl with pig tails, and the other a redhead whose hair was a shade or two lighter than the Weasleys, running more along the coloration of his mother's hair. Both of them looked up when he knocked, and Harry opened the door enough to poke his head in.

"Would you two mind if I sit with you?" he asked, taking in more of their features. The blond girl had blue eyes and fair, unblemished skin, while the redhead had brown eyes and exactly seven freckles dotting her nose cutely. He couldn't see much more than that because they were wearing their Hogwarts robes, but even that was useful, as it told him they were

probably raised in the wizarding world—or were very excited muggleborns.

The two girls looked at each other, before the blond looked back at him with a bright smile. "Not at all," she said, her voice just as cheerful as her face. "Come on in."

"Thank you."

Harry walked into the compartment, setting his trunk down before absently pointing his wand at it and using the levitation charm to put into its new place overhead.

Two gasps were heard before the voice of the blond said, "how did you do that?"

Harry turned to see two sets of eyes staring at him in awe. He blinked.

"You mean the levitation charm?" he asked for clarification. When they both gave him a nod, Harry shrugged. "It's just one of the first year spells that I read about in the Standard Book of Spells."

"That's so cool," the blond girl said. "I've tried doing some magic before as well, but I've never been able to get any of the spells to work. And you did it without even speaking!"

"Ah, well, I always felt that speaking a spell is more of a way of focusing, rather than because it's necessary," Harry said diplomatically as he sat down. Not wanting to speak about his skills in magic and possibly incriminate himself, he decided to switch topics. "I'd like to apologize for barging in here; I'm sure you two would rather be on your own."

"Oh, it's no problem." Once again the blond spoke up, waving her hand airily. Already Harry was beginning to notice the dynamics between the two. The pig-tailed girl was clearly the more talkative one. Meanwhile, the redhead was much more quiet and more than a little shy. Even now he could see the way she would turn to look at him, blush, then look away. "But now that you mention it, why were you still searching for a compartment? The train has been moving for like, an hour already."

"Let's just say I ended up sitting next to someone who doesn't know the meaning of the word tact, and leave it at that," Harry said with a sigh. The two girls looked at each other, both probably wondering what he meant. Thankfully, they seemed to understand the word tact better than Ron did, because neither of them asked for clarification, something he was very thankful for.

"I'm Hannah," the blond girl introduced herself after a slight pause. "Hannah Abbot, and the redhead with me is Susan Bones." Harry started at the name, recognizing it as one of the Founding Five families that had formed the Ministry. He also, thanks to Andromeda, knew that if this girl was a Bones, then she was also related to Amelia Bones, the current Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

"A pleasure to meet you," Harry said, taking the hand that Hannah held out to him. He brought her hand to his face and let his lips gently brush against her knuckles in the manner Andromeda had shown him was proper when greeting female witches. The blond girl, Hannah, blushed, and Harry turned to look at a blushing Susan who was already offering her hand to him, which he repeated the gesture. "And you as well." He took a deep breath, wondering if this would end in disaster. "My name is Harry Potter."

"Are you really?" asked Hannah while Susan's eyes widened. Harry flicked his gaze towards the blond girl for a moment, sighed, then sat back down after letting Susan's hand go. With his hand free, Harry brushed away the bangs covering his scar.

"This is so cool!" Hannah breathed excitedly. "I can't believe we're sitting with *the* Harry Potter!"

"I don't think meeting me is that big of a deal," Harry edged, just a little bit annoyed. He knew people were going to get excited when they saw him, but that didn't make dealing with it anymore comfortable.

"Not a big deal?" Hannah gaped at him for all of two seconds. "Harry, you're like, a wizarding celebrity! Everyone and their mother knows you. Not to mention you defeated You-Know-Who..." she trailed off when she saw the look on Harry's face.

"And all it cost me was my parents," he told her, his lips forming a thin line. He didn't look quite angered, but he was clearly agitated. And why wouldn't he be? So many people seemed to forget that his parents had sacrificed their lives for him that night Voldemort was defeated. Maybe he wouldn't have been so bothered by his celebrity status if his parents had survived, or if people actually took the time to think about how he might feel, but from what he had seen so far that wasn't going to happen.

"Sorry," Hannah mumbled lowly, his words seemingly sucking out all of her previous enthusiasm about meeting a celebrity.

"It's fine," Harry said. He knew he was being too hard on her—just as he'd been too hard on Ron. After all, who wouldn't be curious about him? It was just as Hannah said, he was a celebrity in their world. To top it off, the people on this train were children, tact and understanding weren't exactly concepts they were familiar with.

With a small sigh, he decided that the pair deserved an apology and explanation so they knew he wasn't actually angry at them.

"I apologize for snapping at you. The boy whose compartment I just left asked me if I remembered the night my parents died when he found out who I was." Both of the girl's gasps told him all he needed to know, and he offered them a small smile. He didn't quite manage it, his face making more of a grimace than anything, but it seemed to do the trick of putting the two at ease. "I didn't mean to take my anger at him out on you two."

"No, no, it's alright," Hannah said, shaking her head back and forth, her blond pig tails swaying behind her. "I can see why you were angry at me. I didn't mean to remind you of your parents death or anything. I was just so excited to meet you."

"I understand." Harry resisted the sigh wanting to pass his lips. "It seems everyone in the wizarding world is excited to meet me." Wanting to change the subject to something less personal, Harry switched topics. "So why don't you two tell me about yourselves?"

The conversation became much less strained after that. Harry learned quite a bit about the two girls he found himself sitting with. Both had apparently been friends for a long time; the Abbots were a minor

pureblood family that were decently wealthy due to the wine vineyards they owned on the mainland, namely France and Italy, and had been allied with the Bones family for the last century.

Susan, he had learned, was indeed related to Amelia Bones, as he had first suspected. In fact, she was the woman's niece, and due to the fact that she and her aunt were the only members of the Bones family remaining, was also the heiress of the family. Harry knew right then that befriending them would prove advantageous for him in the future, if for no other reason than that.

He also learned much about the two as people. Hannah, for example, was very talkative and even more confident. She didn't have much trouble stating her opinions and wasn't shy about speaking her mind. Her friend Susan, on the other hand, was much more shy and soft spoken. She tended to let her friend do the talking, and the few times she did speak it was with a light tinge of pink dusting her cheeks. Harry also noticed that the redhead couldn't seem to keep eye contact with him for more than five seconds, before averting them and her face would flush a deeper shade of red.

He wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but put it out of his mind for the moment.

More than what he had learned about the two with him, Harry was surprised to discover how easy talking with them was. While the conversation hadn't taken all of his attention away from his thoughts of Lisa, they had proven to not only be an able distraction, but the two girls were also quite pleasant to converse with.

A part of him chalked it up to them being girls. Since Lisa was not only his best, but also his *only* friend at the moment, and had been for over three years, Harry found it easier talking to the opposite gender. Another reason he felt his mind was so at ease among the two was because they were witches. He didn't have to pretend to be normal in front of them, and that simply made acting more natural easier.

"So wait," Hannah said as she chewed on a pumpkin patty Harry had bought for her from the trolley (he was a gentleman, after all). "You mean

to tell me you didn't even know about the wizarding world until you got your Hogwarts letter?"

"No, I only knew the basics," Harry said as he looked over the card of Albus Dumbledore he had gotten from a chocolate frog. He watched the man with half-moon glasses, a long, crooked nose, and flowing silvery hair, beard and mustache disappear from inside of the picture frame, before turning his attention back to Hannah. "You see, my aunt, that is to say, my mum's sister, is a muggle, but because my mum was a witch she knew about magic. However, she only told me a little bit, so I didn't know very much about the wizarding world itself, just that it and magic existed."

"But what about all the stories?" asked Hannah, the expression on her face looking just as shocked as her voice sounded.

"You mean the stories about me fighting dragons and trolls, and adventuring through Africa while fighting against indigenous tribes and ferocious nundus?" asked Harry with a quirk of his left eyebrow. "They're all lies. I didn't even know dragons and trolls actually existed, I've never heard of a nundu before, and I've never even seen a banshee much less fought one. I didn't even know those books existed until I went shopping for my school books."

"But that's illegal!" Susan gasped in shock, right before she blushed when Hannah and Harry turned to look at her. Despite this, she managed to continue on with only a little bit of stuttering. "S-since you're the heir to the Potter family, it's illegal for them to use your name without your consent."

"I know," Harry said, giving her a thin smile.

"Do you... do you want me to contact my aunty?" asked Susan, her face getting redder the longer she spoke. "If I tell her about this I'm sure she can help deal with this matter..." she trailed off, her face turning nearly as red as her hair when Harry gave her the first genuine smile he'd had all day.

"Thank you," he told her sincerely. "But there's no need to worry..." he paused, wondering if he should continue, before figuring there wasn't much they could say that would give away what he was doing so long as

he didn't let them know what he had planned. "I already have a plan put into motion that should solve this problem nicely, so there's no need to concern yourself over it, though I do appreciate the offer."

"You're welcome," Susan whispered softly, looking almost like she wanted to both shrink in her seat and bask in Harry's smile at the same time.

The good mood that had begun to permeate the compartment would have continued, but at that moment, the compartment door slid open and in walked three boys.

Harry knew from the moment he glanced at them that these three would likely be trouble. The one in front was the obvious leader; a boy with slicked back blond hair, blue eyes, and a narrow chin. He didn't look like much, and truth be told Harry was more worried about the two much larger boys standing on either side of him. The term guerillas seemed to fit them both well; they were large, easily towering over the blond boy, and probably around a half a head taller than Harry, and that said nothing about their girth. Both of them were wearing rather stupid expressions on their faces, which Harry took as them trying to look intimidating.

They reminded him of Dudley.

"Is it true?" The one in the middle asked. "They're all saying that Harry Potter's in this compartment. So it's you, is it?"

"Yes," said Harry, wondering who had informed this boy that he was in his compartment. It wasn't like he had told anyone. Then again, he hadn't made much of an effort to hide his scar, and a lot of people had been staring when he was walking down the hall.

"My name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy," the boy introduced himself. He then gestured behind him carelessly. "And this is Crabbe and Goyle."

"Ah, then you would be the heir to the Malfoy family, yes?" Harry asked, tilting his head with just a touch of inquisitiveness. He had heard a great deal about the Malfoy family from Andromeda. According to her, they were a family to watch out for and not ones to be crossed lightly.

"I see you've heard of me," Draco preened under the knowledge that Harry knew who he was.

"We've all heard of you, Malfoy," Hannah said with more than just a little disdain. "You're the son of a cockroach. Now why don't you bugger off!"

"And just who are you?" Draco asked with a sneer. "Some uppity little witch with no pedigree? You should learn to show respect in the presence of your betters!"

Hannah opened her mouth to retort, however, Susan gripped the girls arm. "Don't," the redhead hushed the girl softly. Hannah looked at her friend for a second, before sighing and deciding to heed Susan's advice.

Draco leered at the two girls, then turned his attention back to Harry. "You'll find that some wizard families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there."

As Draco Malfoy held out his hand, the raven-haired young man with the lightning bolt scar went over what had just happened in his mind and come to several conclusions.

The first was that this Draco was arrogant, a bully, and one of those people who held onto the belief that those of pure and noble blood were better than other witches and wizards out of principle. This was not unexpected, considering what Andromeda had told him about the boy's father, though the woman had hoped the son of her estranged sister would have been brought up better.

The second was that Draco Malfoy wanted his allegiance. For what purpose, Harry didn't know. Then again, just by being able to say he was friends with the boy-who-lived was enough of a reason to want an allegiance.

Harry's mind worked at light speeds as he tried to figure out what he should do to quell this situation before things went south. Unfortunately, he wasn't quite sure what to do. He did not want to form an alliance with Draco Malfoy, not only because of the boy's apparent disdain for people he believed were beneath his station, but also because forming an

alliance with a family like the Malfoy's meant many other possible allegiances he could gain later in the future would become closed off to him.

"What do you mean there are some wizard families who are better than others?" asked Harry, adding just the right inflection of curiosity to make the question seem innocuous. It was a stalling tactic, he knew. Hopefully the blond boy wouldn't be keen enough to pick up on it.

Fortunately for Harry, Draco did not seem to realize this and began speaking with great enthusiasm. "Those families of pure blood who have power and know how to use it are, of course, better than some no name family with not a knut to their name. Naturally, my family is quite powerful; my father even has the ears of the Minister."

"You mean your father bought the ears of the Minister," Hannah replied snidely before Susan could stop her.

Watching Draco's face turn pink at the insult, Harry decided he needed to nip this in the bud before it came to blows. "You've given me much to think about," he told Draco in a very serious voice. "Perhaps some other time we can discuss this at greater length."

"Of course," Draco Malfoy replied, his pleasure at hearing that Harry was at least thinking about his offer seemed to make him forget about Hannah's comment. "I look forward to speaking with you more."

Draco and his two henchmen left. Harry turned to Hannah and said, "you really should be a little more careful with what you say. That situation could have easily devolved into violence if I hadn't appeased Draco in some way."

"Why should I have to be careful with my words around that jerk?" Hannah asked with, from what Harry had seen so far, uncharacteristic anger.

"Because if you don't, then that boy could easily make your life miserable," Harry answered calmly. "Trust me on this, I've seen his type before. Draco Malfoy is a bully and has a superiority complex the size of Asia. Not only that, but his father is a very powerful political figure in

magical Britain, not to mention a Death Eater."

Death Eater was the term coined for those who had served under Voldemort. A group of witches and wizards who held onto the inherent belief that purebloods were better than other witches and wizards, and whose hatred of muggleborns and all things non-magical was well known. Before the war had ended, many non-magical families had lost their lives to Death Eater raids, and more than a few magical families became extinct because of them.

"Don't you mean *former* Death Eater?" asked Hannah, saying the word 'former' with enough sarcasm to fill the compartment.

"No." Harry shook his head. "I mean Death Eater. People don't just reform their ways so easily. From what I heard, Dacro's father got out of going to Azkaban without even getting a trial simply by claiming he was under the Imperius Curse and throwing some money at the Ministry. Anyone who does something like that to get off Scott free clearly hasn't reformed their ways."

"How do you know so much?" asked Susan, once more speaking before her mind caught up with her. She blushed a bit, but plowed on regardless. "I mean, you just told us that you've only been in the Wizarding World since you got your Hogwarts letter. It just seems... odd, that you would know so much about our world."

Hearing such a well-thought out question caused Harry's estimation of the girl to rise. Truth be told, while he had thought the girl to be a pleasant person during the first few minutes of their conversation, he had not really been able to form much of an opinion about her. Compared to the outgoing and talkative Hannah Abbot, Susan Bones had seemed a bit diffident. However, hearing her questioning his story in such a way, and giving supporting evidence to back it up, let Harry know that while the red-haired girl may be quiet and unassuming, she was also intelligent and had a sharp mind.

He gave the girl an honest smile filled with more than a healthy dose of respect. The girl took one look at him and blushed to the roots of her hair.

"While I may have only been in the Wizarding World for a short while, that

doesn't mean I've been idle," Harry informed them. "The moment I learned that I was the heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter, I determined that it would behoove me to learn as much about the current climate and most recent events of the last few decades. Considering most of those events involve me in some way, it was definitely a good idea."

He did not mention Andromeda, or that he had someone helping him learn everything he would need to know about politics, etiquette and the 'who's who' of the wizarding world. He didn't want the possibility of his dealings with the former Black getting out... yet.

"You mean you've been studying all this time?" Hannah sounded aghast that someone would spend their entire summer reading. "We haven't even started school yet!"

Harry's lips twitched in both amusement and slight depression. A strange combination. But then again, it wasn't everyday someone he just met said something so... Lisa, and he couldn't help but compare the two. Which explained why he felt both elated and saddened.

"Well," Harry drawled a bit. "I figured it was prudent to learn as much as I could about the current climate of magical Britain after I was mobbed by an entire restaurant of witches and wizards wanting to shake my hand in the Leaky Cauldron."

Both girls gasped.

"They didn't?" Hannah asked with a gaping mouth.

Harry just gave her a nod. "They did. At the time, I didn't even know that I was famous, so you can imagine my surprise. I figured that if I was going to be mobbed everywhere I go, then I should at least know why."

"I suppose I can understand why you would want to read then," Hannah said, before she scrunched up her nose. "Still, I don't think I could stand doing nothing but reading all summer long."

Harry gave her a mildly amused look, the kind he often gave to Lisa when she said something he thought was stupid. "Now why do you think all I

did was read during the summer? I'll have you know I did a lot more than just sitting around reading books all day."

"Like what?"

"Well..." Harry licked his lips for a moment as he pondered what to tell her. "I did spend a lot of time practicing my martial arts..."

Here we have it, Harry's having some problems and blows up at Ron, and also means Hannah and Susan, as well as has a minor run in with Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger. Next chapter will have the Sorting Ceremony.

Chao!

The Sorting Hat Sings

The Sorting Hat Sings

As the train ride wore on, Harry found himself actually relaxing his guard around the two girls he shared a compartment with. He had even been willing to tell them more about himself than he would have normally been comfortable with; like his martial arts, his love of learning new things, and most importantly, his friend Lisa.

It was a great surprise to Harry when he actually began telling the two about his non-magical friend. While Harry wouldn't call himself introverted, he wasn't extroverted either, but more of a mix of the two. He would speak with anybody and everybody, and could be outgoing when required, but he tended to be a private person when it came to his personal life.

This presented Harry with a great mystery. Why was he being so forthcoming? Was it because they were both magical like him? Because they were both girls? He would admit to being more comfortable around females, but was that enough to make him comfortable about personal information with two people he'd just met?

Or could it be due to how the two reminded him of Lisa? Sure, neither of them was exactly like Lisa. No two people could ever be the same, not even identical twins, but that didn't change the fact that he saw bits and pieces of his best friend in these two—Hannah with her outgoing demeanor, and Susan with her shy personality.

Admittedly, Hannah reminded him more of Lisa than Susan. His non-magical friend rarely ever showed such shyness as the red-haired girl. But there were instances, quite a few in fact, where his friend would act inexplicably demure.

Whatever the case, he could not deny that he enjoyed speaking with Hannah and Susan.

It eventually began to darken outside, and the three realized they would arriving at Hogwarts soon. After putting his robe on over his normal clothes, Harry left the compartment and stood with his back to the glass window, allowing the girls some privacy to change.

As he waited outside, the train began slowing down and a voice echoed through the hall: "We will be arriving at Hogwarts in five minutes time. Please leave your luggage on the train; it will be taken to Hogwarts separately."

A minute after the voice had spoken, Hannah and Susan stepped out, and not long after that the train slowed to a halt. Harry and his two new acquaintances moved with the throng of people as they stepped into the cold night air.

He shivered for a moment as the cold air seeped into his bones. However, the coolness didn't last long before his own magic surged forth to counteract the weathers effects, warming his body until it matched his standard temperature of 98 degrees.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

A loud voice called out into the din. Harry turned with the other first years to see the largest man he'd ever laid eyes on. Easily standing over seven feet tall, the man towered above the frightened first years. The giant, for that was all Harry could think to call him, had long messy hair, a just as messy beard and mustache combination, and black beady eyes that peered at them from in between scraggly locks of hair. Despite his imposing and downright terrifying figure, the large man possessed a friendly air that belied his size.

Harry frowned as a brief memory played in his head. The image was blurry, almost like something had been interfering with his sight, but he distinctly remembered this man soaring over London on a flying motorcycle shortly after his parents death.

"C'mon, follow me—any more firs' years? Mind yer step, now! Firs' years follow me!"

Harry moved with the others, following the man down a dark, narrow

path. The only thing visible beyond the lantern the giant of a man held was the barely visible outline of trees on either side. So dark was it that it took Harry a moment to realize that neither Hannah nor Susan were with him anymore. He wondered when they had gotten separated.

"Ye'all get yer firs' sight o' Hogwarts in a sec," he called over his shoulder. "Jus' round this bend here."

The narrow path soon opened onto the edge of a great black lake that Harry could only guess the depths of. Several boats lined the shore, obviously their transport to Hogwarts. And there, sitting perched atop a high mountain, was the school they would be going to.

While Harry was not among those who let out a loud "ooooh!" at the sight, he would never deny to being impressed. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was an enormous castle that appeared to have been taken right out of the first century; tall and imposing, it seemed like a veritable fortress that could and had withstood numerous sieges in the past. Its many turrets and towers reached up as if to grasp the heavens, and the windows he could make out sparkled in the moonlit night.

It was not the castle itself that got Harry's attention, however. No, while the school was imposing and grand enough that Harry felt as if he had gone back in time during King Arthur's rein, it was not the outward appearance that truly held his intrigue.

It was the feeling of power the castle gave off; the way the hairs raised on the back of his neck, as if some kind of mystical energy permeated the atmosphere; the way his blood surged through his veins at an increased rate, like some foreign energy had invaded his body and was being pumped into his bloodstream and nervous system, heightening his awareness to levels previously unperceived by man. More than that, it was the joyous singing that rang inside of his mind, as if a thousand voices were calling out in union. More lively than the feeling Diagon Alley gave off, more hallowed than the reverence given off at Ollivanders, more powerful than both of those places combined, Hogwarts felt alive.

Harry wondered at this. He had come to suspect that places where magic took place, or where a lot of magic users congregated, became imbued

with said magic, enough that someone in tune with the mystical energy could feel it. Was that what he felt here? Had the thousands upon thousands of students Hogwarts had hosted throughout the centuries imbued so much magic into the castle walls that the entire school had become sentient? A being of pure magic that went beyond the rock and stone that composed it?

Harry didn't know, but like everything else he had seen and felt since entering this world, he had every intention of finding out.

"No more'n four to a boat!" The giant called out as he pointed toward the small fleet of boats sitting on the shore. Harry didn't particularly care who he sat with—though a part of him did wish he hadn't lost Hannah or Susan—and just sat in the closest boat to him. He was joined by three other people, including the brunette girl he had met in Madam Malkin's.

"Everyone in?" asked the large man in a loud voice. "Right then—forward!"

As the boats began to glide across the waters surface, Harry took a second to look at the two occupants he had yet to meet. His gaze first drifted toward the male of the duo, tall and dark skinned, with high cheek bones and slanted eyes. His facial structure held a distinct Italian appearance.

His eyes flickered towards the other member of their troupe, a pretty girl with long blond hair flowing down her back in gentle waves and cold blue eyes like two chips of ice. Her cheek bones were slightly higher than average and a bit more defined, yet still soft. They gave her a much more regal bearing, much like Andromeda. Harry suspected she was a pure-blood witch. She looked much more mature than the brunette beside him, and not just her physical appearance.

"Hey! I remember you from Madam Malkin's!" The brunette exclaimed upon getting a better look at him as the moon cast its gentle glow upon their boat. The other two turned to look at Harry upon hearing the exclamation.

Harry's lips twitched ever so slightly as he stared at the brunette. "And I remember you," he replied, only a small hint of the amusement he felt

entering his voice. "Not that I'm surprised by this. Our meeting was quite... memorable."

The girl flushed as she, too, remembered their first meeting.

"I don't believe we properly introduced ourselves back then," he said, holding out his hand to the girl, who took it without hesitation. Harry gracefully brought it to his lips, brushing them lightly against her knuckles. In light of the moon, her blush became incandescent. "My name is Harry Potter."

Harry felt his eyebrow twitch when the dark-skinned boy's eyes widened and traveled to Harry's forehead and the scar shone there. Like her counterpart, the blond's eyes also widened and looked toward his scar. However, those icy blue irises narrowed a second later and a calculating appeared on her face.

The brunette's reaction was by far the most amusing of the three. She squeaked, her hand jerking back as if burned and her face turning so red he thought it might catch fire.

"Harry Potter!?" she asked in shock. "You mean to tell me that all this time I was talking to *the* Harry Potter and I didn't even know it? Why didn't you tell me?"

Harry shrugged. "It never really came up in our conversation, and besides, you didn't ask for my name."

"Well... I suppose I didn't, did I?" the girl asked, embarrassed as she realized he was right. She had been far too busy discussing Hogwarts and making a fool of herself by insulting the House of the person pinning her robes. "Still, I wish I had known I was talking to Harry Potter back then."

"Would it have made a difference?" asked Harry. The brunette opened her mouth to reply, no doubt to inform him that, yes, it would have made a difference, but he spoke first. "You know now, and you still haven't given me your name."

She blushed again. "Right, sorry." A second later she gained her second

wind, and all embarrassment emanating off her person vanished as if it had never existed. It was almost like she had flipped a switch. "I'm Tracey Davis."

"A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Davis," Harry inclined his head, before turning to the other two. "And may I know your names?"

"Blaise Zabini," the dark skinned boy said and, after a moments hesitation, held out his hand. Harry grasped it firmly within his own and gave a strong shake.

"Blaise..." Harry murmured. "If I'm not mistaken, that's a French name derived from the Latin *blaesus*, and was the name of the tutor and later biographer of Merlin when he started traveling around Britain."

Blaise's left eyebrow raised. "You are correct on both accounts."

"And yet Zabini is an Italian name," Harry continued with a smile. "Your eyes suggest you are of Italian descent, yes?"

The right eyebrow joined the left in being raised. "Right again."

Harry smiled and nodded his head, pleased to see his assumptions were correct, then turned his attention to the blond girl. In turn, she looked at him for several long seconds, and when he held her gaze without flinching inclined her head.

"Daphne Greengrass," she introduced herself in a voice every bit as cold and aristocratic as her eyes.

"A pleasure." Harry gave her a slight bow of his head in return. He also took note of the fact that she hadn't offered her hand, which meant she had no intention of entering an alliance with him, or at least no desire to at this time.

"Isn't this exciting?" Tracey asked as she looked up at Hogwarts castle. "I can't believe we're finally going to get to learn magic!"

"I must confess to being quite jubilant myself," Harry admitted, his eyes flickering over to Daphne. He had seen her lips twitch upwards for a

moment when Tracey spoke, as if she were going to make a remark, but had held herself back due to his presence. It suggested familiarity to the other two in the boat. Perhaps these three were friends? Or at least, Tracey and Daphne were friends.

"Jubila-what?" asked Tracey, blinking several times as her eyes were pruned away from the castle and onto him.

"It means excited, Tracey," Daphne answered before Harry could. He cast his eyes over to her once again, but she studiously ignored his gaze. It seemed that mask of coldness had slipped, if only for a moment. How interesting.

"Ah." Tracey nodded. "Why didn't he just say excited?"

"I did," Harry said with a raised eyebrow. "I just used a another word to do it."

Tracey rolled her eyes at the answer, and her mouth opened to give a retort when she was interrupted.

"Heads down!" The giant of a man yelled out as the boats reached the cliff. Blaise, Daphne and Tracey bent their heads down as they passed through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening in the cliff face.

"Why are you three ducking?" asked Harry, amused. Tracey and the other two looked up to see him sitting straight. When he noticed their looks, he offered a wry grin. "That man is over ten feet tall..." he paused, then added, "and standing up. Naturally, he would need to hunch over to pass through."

"Oh..." Tracey murmured with another blush. She sat back up and tried to regain whatever composure she had left, the other two doing the same, though with much more success than the brunette.

Those two were definitely purebloods. Harry surmised they had likely been trained on how to keep themselves collected, as tradition dictated, according to Andromeda.

After taking them through a dark tunnel that Harry imagined brought them

right underneath Hogwarts itself, they came upon an underground harbor.

As the ships began to stop, Harry stood up and stepped out, then turned to the closest person to him. Surprisingly, it was not Tracey, who had been sitting right next to him (she was already out of the boat); it was Daphne. Despite her stoic demeanor toward him, he offered his hand and, after another second of intense staring, the blond girl gently set hers in his palm and allowed him to help her out of the boat.

They made their way along the path, following the giant man as they and the others walked up a flight of stone steps, only to stop in front of a large, oak door. The giant, whose name Harry had yet to learn, knocked on the door exactly three times.

The door swung open and Harry saw Professor McGonagall standing just inside the entrance, looking as stern as ever.

"The first years, professor McGonagall," the giant announced in a happy voice.

"Thank you, Hagrid," Professor McGonagall said. Harry filed the giant of a man's name away for future reference. "I will take them from here."

She pulled the doors wide, and Harry would admit to being impressed with the size of the entrance hall. It was easily large enough to fit two or more houses of the Dursley's size and still have some room left over. The floor, walls, and Harry suspected the ceiling (it was too high up for him to see) were all made of large, gray stone. Off to the side, at the other end of the hall, was a magnificent marble staircase leading to other parts of the castle.

Professor McGonagall led the group across the flagged stone floor. As they walked, Harry could hear the droning of a hundred voices coming from a doorway to the right, and correctly guessed that the rest of the students must be in there. It was strange to him, then, when Professor McGonagall led them not into the room where the older students resided, but to a small empty chamber off the hall.

There was a moment of discomfort when everyone began crowding around each other. It reminded Harry briefly of his encounter in the Leaky

Cauldron, which still brought chills down his spine. Thankfully, no one tried crushing him with their enthusiasm, allowing him to shove his discomfort away easily enough.

He turned his head when Tracey bumped into him as they were forced into close quarters. She stumbled, and Harry allowed her to steady herself by grabbing onto his arm.

"Sorry," she mumbled over the din of chattering voices.

"It's fine," Harry replied as he let the girl continue holding his arm for support. He was so used to Lisa holding onto him that physical contact with a female didn't bother him. Though he would admit it felt a little odd with this new girl grabbing him, but chalked it up to being more familiar with Lisa than Tracey.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Professor McGonagall began, silencing any and all conversations. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room.

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the house cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours."

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

Harry saw her gaze linger on a round faced boy whose cloak was fastened under his left ear, and the redhead known as Ron who had a smudge of dirt on his nose.

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

As Professor McGonagall left, Harry peered at his surroundings. All the other first years looked nervous; the bushy haired girl he'd met earlier was muttering spells very quickly under her breath, Ron was tittering nervously as he told anyone near him that his brother said they had to pass some kind of test, and even Daphne and Blaise suddenly looked quite pale.

"Calm down," Harry told the three he near him in a hushed whisper. It wasn't hard as it was so loud with so many students chattering nervously at once—one whisper would be impossible to overhear. He could feel Tracey's grip on his arm tighten as she continued to worry herself. "Worrying about the sorting isn't going to do you any good."

"How can you be so calm?" asked Tracey in a nervous voice. Daphne and Blaise both looked at him as well, and for a moment he thought he saw a glint of respect coming from the blond girl when she saw he wasn't showing any signs of nervousness.

"Easily," Harry replied. "The sorting ceremony is designed to place you within the house you would do best in based upon the traits that the Four Founders felt were most important to them. That means they must have some kind of enchantment or perhaps a spell that will be able to tell which of the Four Founders' traits you possess the most of and sort you based on that."

Truth be told, Harry did not approve of how people were sorted based upon their most prevalent trait. He had studied much this summer and learned about the most recent history of his world, and after reading up on the war between Voldemort and his Death Eaters and the rest magical Britain, he had come to a single conclusion. It was because of the way children were sorted that had allowed Voldemort to gain so many followers.

Children were very malleable. Everything from their personalities to their beliefs were created based upon influences both external and internal. By sorting all of the children who were ambitious and desired power into a

single house, Hogwarts had allowed Voldemort to gain a foothold in the younger generation. Worse still, Slytherin house was generally considered the house of the pure, due to how many children of darker pureblood families went there more as a matter of tradition than because they held the traits Salazar Slytherin so admired.

"But aren't you worried about what house you might be sorted into?" asked Tracey. Though it was her who asked the question, Harry could see both Daphne and Blaise perking up. Clearly, they were just as interested in what he had to say as their friend.

"Not really," said Harry, shrugging. "I care not for what house they sort me into. It's not as if being placed into a specific house will change my goals. It will simply present me with a different set of challenges."

He noticed that while Tracey was looking at him in shock and awe, the other two were giving him curious glances. Blaise looked intrigued by his words, as if wondering about the veracity of them. Daphne, on the other hand, was giving him a calculating look, making Harry wonder if perhaps she was trying to determine his worth.

He was torn from his musings when a scream rang near the back of the crowd.

Harry reacted instantly. Pulling himself out of Tracey's grasp he spun around on the balls of his left foot, body shifting, feet spreading, center of mass lowering as he moved into the ready stance he favored when sparring Master Wei. His magic flared as adrenaline pumped through his veins at an accelerated rate. Already his mind was coming up with strategies and counter strategies as he determined the best course of action. The room was crowded, filled to the brim with children his age. That meant he would need to find some way to weave through them if he wanted to deal with whatever threat had presented itself. Perhaps if he levitated himself in the air and floated over them? He wouldn't be able to hold it long, but he should at least be able to—

"What the hell?"

—his thoughts were completely derailed when he saw the cause of the scream. Ghosts. About twenty of them in all. Human apparitions made

from what looked like ectoplasm or some other form of spiritual matter. Pearly-white and semi-translucent, they glided across the hall, not even paying attention to the first years. They seemed to be having some kind of argument.

"Forgive and forget, I say," what looked like a fat monk was saying, "we ought to give him a second chance—"

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost—I say, what are you all doing here?" A ghost wearing a ruff and tights suddenly noticed the first years.

Nobody answered.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be Sorted, I suppose?"

A few nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

"Now, form a line," Professor McGonagall told the first years, "and follow me."

Harry found himself getting in line and following the stern professor with Tracey directly behind him, followed by Daphne and then Blaise. In front of him was a girl with dark red hair and a few freckles he had yet to meet.

Feeling more nervous than he allowed anyone else to see, Harry remained silent as he walked out of the small chamber, across the hall, and through a set of large double doors.

The chamber Harry found himself was large, very large. He couldn't

begin estimating its size, but it had to be at least three times larger than the entrance hall in length and width if not height. A sea of candles floating in mid air illuminated the room, casting light and shadows along the many hundreds of faces within. There were five tables laid out in the room; four long tables running parallel from each other where all of the students sat, and one table near the back where Harry could see the teacher's conversing with each other.

It was not hard for him to determine that the four tables were the dividing barriers between houses. He could see the variations in house colors on the students' robes. Gryffindor in their gold and red splendor at the far right near the windows, followed by the bright yellow and dark black Hufflepuffs to their direct left. Ravenclaw came next in with their regal bronze and blue coloration, and on the direct opposite of where the Gryffindors sat were the Slytherins, marked by the dark green and silver colors lining their robes.

Taking a glance up, Harry caught his first glimpse of the magnificent ceiling he had read about. According to *Hogwarts, A History*, the ceiling had a powerful enchantment designed by Rowena Ravenclaw herself to look exactly like the sky outside. Currently, it was dark save for the hundreds of twinkling stars that filled the velvety night sky.

As Harry lined up with the other first years, his mind began to run wild. He wasn't nervous about the Sorting, but rather, if he would be able to live up to the expectations that he had placed upon himself. Could he truly become the greatest wizard in the world? Would the many students peering at him and the other first years, and those he stood next to, look up to him as one of those people who became a great leader that accomplished great things?

For a moment, thoughts of failure pressed against his mind. What if he didn't accomplish his dreams? What if he ended up leading a life of mediocrity? How would he ever be able to face his parents when he passed on? How would he even look them in the eye?

He squashed those thoughts immediately and took a few slow, deep breaths. It would not do to dwell on 'what ifs,' especially when they had yet to happen. He couldn't allow himself to be clouded by doubt. He

would be the best, and he *would* make his parents proud. There was no room for failure.

Professor McGonagall soon placed a four-legged stool in front of the first years, and atop of the stool she placed a hat. It was a very worn hat, raggedy and frayed. It looked old enough to have been around since the founders.

Harry stared at the hat with everyone else, wondering just how this would sort them into their houses. What enchantments did this old, worn looking piece of cloth possess?

He found out a moment later when, much to his great surprise, a tear opened near the brim like a mouth and the hat began to sing:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hats sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can cap them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

*Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry Set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffis are true And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
if you've a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You'll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.
So put me on! Don't be afraid!
And don't get in a flap!
You're in safe hands (though I have none)
For I'm a Thinking Cap!"*

Harry clapped with the others, though his applause was for a very different reason than the other students. What an extraordinary piece of magic! He couldn't help but conjure up wild theories on how such a thing as a singing hat was possible. Perhaps it was some very advanced animation charm used to mimic human speech. Or could it be some kind of advanced combination of enchantments and runes? Maybe the Four Founders had even poured all their considerable talents and gave the hat

sentence! The possibilities were endless!

Professor McGonagall stepped forward with a parchment in hand, and Harry brought his mind back to the present. It looked like the Sorting was finally about to begin.

"When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

Harry watched as the blond girl he had met from before walked up to the stool and sat down. She looked nervous, he noted.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" Shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. Harry saw the ghost of the Fat Friar waving merrily at her.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" Shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah, who hugged the girl the moment she arrived.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

Harry sighed as he realized it would be awhile before they called his name. Sometimes he hated how his last name started with a letter near the end of the alphabet.

As his ears picked up the names of the people being called and his mind cataloged what house they were sorted into, he decided to focus most of his attentions on his own thoughts. Mainly, Harry tried to determine what he would do depending on the house he was sorted into. During the summer he had come up with many plans on what he wanted to accomplish, and while all paths led to the same goal, each one he could take branched out in many different directions. Each plan would change depending on what house he fell in with.

Of course, he hadn't planned for every occasion. Naturally, while Harry knew quite a bit about magical Britain thanks to his self-studies and Andromeda, he didn't know everything. It would be impossible to plan for every eventuality, especially when he didn't know anything about his peers. How would they react to his plans? Who would oppose him? Who would align themselves with him? These things would take research before he could put any of his half-formed plans into action.

Harry took careful note of the few people he had met when they were sorted. While both Hannah and Susan went into Hufflepuff, Blaise, Daphne and Tracey were sorted into Slytherin. On the other end of the spectrum, Hermione Granger ended in Gryffindor.

One of the people who caught Harry's eye the most when they were sorted was Neville Longbottom, the round faced boy whose robe was fastened under his left ear. He looked far more nervous than all of the other students, almost tripping on his own two feet in his haste to get his sorting over with. Unfortunately for Neville, the hat took much longer to decide where it would sort him and he was forced to endure the stares until then.

"GRYFFINDOR!"

More and more people went, and Harry's mind automatically identified and memorized each and every one of them. His keen mind and observant eyes cataloged everything he could about the people he would share classes with; the way they walked; the way they held themselves; the expressions on their faces. Nothing escaped his notice, which was good, because he would need every bit of information he could glean if his plans had any hopes of getting off the ground.

"Potter, Harry!"

And then it was his turn. Harry straightened his back and set his shoulders as he strode forward with confident steps that belied his nerves. He held his head high, projecting the air of someone who did not feel even the slightest bit apprehensive.

Whispers broke out amongst the hall.

"Potter, did she say?"

"The Harry Potter?"

"Wow, he's really tall for a first year."

"Look at how cute he is!"

Harry almost lost his demeanor when he heard the comments being made. He truly hoped he would not be subject to any of the cheek pinching some of the older girls at his former school had done when he was younger.

Well, if they did, at least it wouldn't be around Lisa to give her any ammunition to tease him with.

Sitting down, the last thing Harry saw before the hat drooped over his eyes was the entirety of the Great Hall staring at him in breathless anticipation.

For a moment nothing happened, and Harry suddenly felt incredibly stupid for wearing this large hat that didn't even fit his head. How could something like a piece of cloth, albeit, a magical piece of cloth with the ability to talk, possibly sort him into his house?

Those thoughts left him when he felt it, an intrusion in his mind. It felt like someone was poking around in the head with a stick. It was invasive, intrusive, and Harry reacted in the same manner he had done when he heard the scream. Violently.

His magic roiled forth, a hurricane that seemed to build within his mind. Like a pressure valve about to explode, the gates holding Harry's magic creaked as he prepared to unleash his power and shove the intruder out.

And then a voice entered his mind, stopping him in his tracks.

"Be at ease, Mr. Potter. I am not going to harm you in anyway."

Harry blinked once, twice, thrice. "Sorting Hat?" he asked tentatively.

"It is I," the hat replied, sounding amused. "And might I say that was an impressive display of power you just showed. Had I not said anything, I dare say that would have shoved me out of your mind quite violently."

"How are you even in my mind in the first place?" asked Harry, his own natural inquisitiveness coming to the fore as his magic settled down. Now that he knew who was in his mind he wasn't as worried. Well, he was, but he was more curious and eager to learn about this seeming impossibility than he was at the thought of having a magical hat poking around in his head. At least for the moment.

The hat seemed to sense this, for Harry got the distinct impression it was amused.

"I was created by the Four Founders with the ability to enter a persons mind so that I might be able to sort them. The ability is not dissimilar to a skill known as Legilimency, which is the human art of delving into the mind and discovering the secrets contained therein."

"I see." Harry processed what he had just learned. "So invading the mind is possible."

"Yes, it is. Though people who are skilled in the art are very rare, even when I was first created. Given that you seem to already have a decent grasp on Occlumency, the art of defending the mind, without even knowing what that is, I suspect you will have an easy time learning Legilimency—provided you find someone to teach you, of course."

"Can you teach me?"

"Unfortunately what I know is not actually Legilimency, but an enchantment placed upon me by Rowena Ravenclaw that allows me to delve into the minds of the young," the hat answered, much to Harry's disappointment. He had been hoping the hat would be able to teach him something, or at least point him in the right direction.

"Such an inquisitive mind," the hat spoke again. "Such intelligence. You would do well in Ravenclaw Mr. Potter. Very well. But let us see what else makes you tick."

"Tell me," Harry spoke up suddenly. "Do you plan on informing anyone about what you find inside my head?" He had many plans that hinged upon them remaining a secret until he deemed them ready to be unveiled, and even if those plans had to be changed later on due to an added or subtracted variable, he didn't want others learning about his goals.

"Not at all," the hat replied. "The magics cast on me have also made it so that I cannot tell anybody about what I find within the minds of those I sort. If I could have done such a thing, the man you know as Lord Voldemort would have never been allowed to attend here."

"You seem perfectly capable of speaking about Voldemort," Harry countered.

"Indeed, but that is because Voldemort has already made his mark on the world," the hat answered. "The magic that keeps me from speaking only extends to those who are still attending Hogwarts. Not those who have long since graduated from these halls. Besides, you and everyone else know of him, and I did not inform you of anything incriminating."

"You may not have said anything, but sometimes it's what you don't say that allows people to make deductions they shouldn't have."

"Such an advanced and analytical mind for one so young," the hat chuckled. "Truly, Rowena herself would have been envious of your talents. That eidetic memory of yours is quite the boon."

"It's also quite the curse."

"Indeed, for one such as you, who has seen the horrors of this world at such a young age, it would be. Still, you cannot deny that your unique ability to remember everything has made you stronger than you would be otherwise."

Harry did not say anything, choosing instead to remain silent. Not that the hat needed an answer from him to know it was right.

"Now, while you have been gifted with an extraordinary intellect, you seem to have many other talents as well." The hat was silent for a

moment. "You know, for such a young boy you are very ambitious. Few are the people who have already set themselves a goal that many have deemed unachievable in their lives."

"And few are the people who obtain greatness because they do not dare to try to reach for the stars," Harry countered. "Even if I should fail in my goal, at the very least I can have the satisfaction of knowing that I was not willing to shoot for mediocrity when I could achieve excellence simply because I was afraid of failing."

The hat chuckled. "You know, Salazar once said something very similar when he and the others were making me. Your ambitions definitely make you worthy of being a Slytherin. Rarely have I seen such drive to accomplish your goals. If the founders still existed, I suspect Salazar himself would have offered you an apprenticeship."

"Thank you."

"Though he may have been a bit disgruntled by your sense of honor. Your courage may have been tempered with your cunning, but I can already see the warrior you can one day become. You are much like Godric in that regard. He was never the kind of person who was willing to stand in the background when the going gets rough. The man was quite reckless, always leading the charge no matter the kind of battle he may face."

"A good leader is the kind who is willing to fight alongside those who serve under him," Harry defended. "It is the job anybody in a position of leadership to ensure the safety and well-being of his subjects. One cannot protect those who have placed their faith in him by hiding behind those he is charged with protecting."

"You are correct." Harry could tell the hat was enjoying their conversation. He sounded almost like Ollivander when the man found out Harry would need to have a wand made for him. "And it is not for the first time someone has compared me to the wand maker. Now, let me see here. What about Hufflepuff? Hmm... yes, you would do well there as well. You know the true meaning of hard work. Your dedication to learning and your lessons in hand-to-hand combat show me this. In fact, you work so

hard I would almost call you obsessive. But what about loyalty? That seems to be a hard thing to earn with you. You are only willing to give loyalty to those you feel have earned it, and the only one who has earned it in your mind is that friend of yours."

"Loyalty not earned is loyalty that's easily betrayed," Harry informed the hat. He had read many historic events of great people who were betrayed at the height of their power. They did so not because they allowed themselves to trust, but because they trusted the wrong people. He would not make the same mistake. "I will not allow myself to be stabbed in the back."

"Yes, I can see that. I can also see that once earned, your loyalty is more fierce than a lioness defending her cubs. That Lisa girl is very lucky to have your friendship. I can see that you truly love the girl as your own kin."

Harry was just about to reply when the hat spoke again, only it was out loud this time.

"Can I help you, Minerva?"

XoX

Albus Dumbledore watched with great anticipation and joy as the first years all lined up to be sorted. He looked out into the sea of faces, watching the nervous children as they no doubt worried about where they would be sorted. Of course, not all were worried. The Malfoy air seemed completely unconcerned—but that was to be expected, given who his father was.

As Professor McGonagall called up the first few students, Dumbledore watched with barely contained excitement as they were Sorted into their houses. It was always a pleasure seeing young faces light up as they were welcomed into their house by the older students. It did his heart good to see such camaraderie.

However, even while his eyes took in those who sat upon the stool and had the hat call out the house they would belong to, the vast majority of his mind wondered which house Harry Potter would be sent into.

Professor McGonagall had told him about her encounter with the young boy, and Dumbledore had been concerned when he heard of the child's reaction to the people in the Leaky Cauldron.

Granted, anybody would be freaked out over having so many people crowd around them like that—and he was disappointed that those people, in their haste, forgot to show consideration towards the person who had saved them from a fate worse than death—but the reaction Harry had toward those people worried him. He did not know what to make of it, and was concerned about whether or not the boy would be able to cope with the students that would no doubt be staring at the boy every chance they got.

Much as he loved children, even he had to admit that most of them lacked the restraint to control their impulses about things that made them curious.

"Potter, Harry!"

When the name of the child who had consumed the vast majority of his thoughts was called, Dumbledore focused on the young boy as he walked confidently up to the stool.

Harry was an attractive child, from what Dumbledore could see. He was fairly tall for his age, easily one of the taller children in his year, and probably around the same height as some of the second years. His hair was very much like James Potter's had been, a fact that caused the old man to smile. However, his eyes were what the Headmaster knew would capture most of the attention. Twin orbs of the most startling green, the same color as the killing curse that had robbed the boy of his parents. Those eyes glowed with repressed energy and power, and spoke of someone who was confident in themselves, but not quite to the point of arrogance. Dumbledore had never seen those eyes on someone so young.

He watched with the rest of the faculty and student body as Harry sat upon the stool and had the hat placed over his head. He waited on bated breath, curious to see which house Harry would belong to. Would he be placed in Gryffindor like his parents, where the heart of the brave dwelt?

Or perhaps Hufflepuff, where those who knew the true value of loyalty and hard work found their place? Maybe he would belong to Ravenclaw; his mother had been quite smart, the most intelligent witch of her age, and he seemed the intelligent sort according to Minerva. Perhaps he would even be in Slytherin, if the ambition he saw in the boy's eyes had anything to say about it.

And so he waited to see where young Harry Potter would go.

And waited.

And waited.

And when the five minute mark was hit, Dumbledore waited some more. However, as the ten minute mark hit, he began to grow concerned. That concern soon turned into alarm when Harry stayed sitting on that stool for over half an hour.

By this point in time many of the students were muttering, some in concern, some in consternation. Not that any of them could truly be blamed. Dumbledore had been in these halls for a long time, over 100-years, and in all that time he had never seen or heard of a sorting taking this long.

Curious, intrigued, and more than a little worried for the boy, Dumbledore decided to use a talent he had developed many years ago. It was called mage sight, and much like the name suggested, it allowed those who were sensitive to the intricacies of magic to 'see' magic in a more literal sense. Normally, when using this ability, Dumbledore could determine much about a person's magic; what element they were aligned to, their predisposition to the light or dark. When using mage sight, many things that would have otherwise remained hidden about a person became visible.

When Dumbledore activated this rare ability and focused it on Harry, he had to shut it off immediately afterward, lest he become blinded. He almost hissed in pain as his eyes stung from the small glimpse he had managed to catch of Harry. Staring at the boy was like staring at the sun!

Being much more careful, Dumbledore tried a second time, making sure

to only look at Harry out of the corner of his eyes so as not to suffer such pain again.

What he saw was shocking—no, more than shocking. His thoughts on the boy's magic being akin to staring at the sun were wrong, oh so wrong. Looking at Harry Potter's magic was like staring into the heart of a star gone super nova. The boy's magic shone so brightly that the only thing Dumbledore could determine about the raven-haired youth was that he had more power at his disposal than most adult wizards. To Dumbledore's sight, it looked like the boy's entire body was one large ball of light so luminescent it was impossible to see the boy's magical core.

And to think he hadn't even gotten started his journey into the world of magic! Dumbledore could only imagine how powerful young Harry would be when he grew up!

By now, Dumbledore estimated that Harry Potter had been seated on that stool for nearly 45-minutes, the longest time he had ever seen anyone being sorted. Usually 45-minutes was enough to sort all of the first years!

Many people seemed to be getting anxious now. He could see many of the students looking on in confusion, wariness, worry, and annoyance. Whispers had already broken out as people wondered why Harry was taking so long. Filius Flitwick watched in unmitigated anticipation. Pomona Sprout looked worried. Rubius Hagrid also appeared concerned. Severus Snape was sneering at Harry Potter. And Minerva McGonagall seemed ready to tear the hat off the boy's head and sort Harry herself.

In fact, the woman was already stepping closer to the hat and boy to ask them to hurry this along.

"Can I help you, Minerva?" the hat asked before the woman could open her mouth. Minerva seemed unsure for a moment, but quickly regained her bearings.

"I am not sure if you are aware, but it has already been forty-five minutes since you have been placed on Mr. Potter's head. Surely, you can hurry up and sort him so the rest of the students can get sorted into their house."

"I apologize, Minerva, however, I seem to be having some trouble figuring out which house Mr. Potter should be sorted into."

Dumbledore found himself intrigued by the hat's answer, and carefully leaned forward to study the boy sitting under the hat some more.

There were only two reasons for the sorting hat to have trouble sorting a child into a house. Sometimes when a child possessed the traits of more than one house the sorting hat couldn't decide where to put them. Dumbledore himself had this problem, his sorting had taken around 10-minutes as the hat tried to determine whether he should belong in Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. The hat had eventually decided on Gryffindor due to the fact that Dumbledore was braver than he was intelligent.

The other reason was that the child being sorted possessed none of the traits the Founder's wanted. In this instance, the hat would either leave that choice up to the child being sorted, or decide on the house it felt would help said child grow the most.

Dumbledore wondered which was the case here, though he suspected it was the former.

"Trouble?" Minerva raised an eyebrow. "Just what kind of trouble takes forty five minutes to fix?"

"The kind where I cannot determine which house someone should belong in."

"And just why can you not determine which house Mr. Potter should be placed?"

"Again, I apologize, Minerva, but due to the magics placed upon me, I cannot tell you why I am having trouble sorting Mr. Potter. Now, if you'd please, perhaps you could let me continue trying to divine where I should sort the young man."

Dumbledore watched as Minerva McGonagall huffed in annoyance. Harry was getting more intriguing by the second, and he couldn't help but wonder where the young man would go.

XoX

"Well, Mr. Potter, it seems we have run out of time," the Sorting hat said, amusement once more seeping into its voice. "I must admit I am surprised by how long it has been since I was placed upon your head. You are a difficult one to sort. I have only had such trouble with one other person, and even then he had one trait that stood above the rest."

"Who was that? If you don't mind my asking?"

"Not at all. The man I am talking about as long since passed from this world, so there is no point in worrying over his identity. His name was Merlin Ambrosius, a man whose incredible ambition led him to becoming the adviser of kings."

Harry raised both eyebrows in surprise, glad that no one could see him doing so. Everyone had heard of Merlin, the man hailed as the greatest wizard to ever grace this world. Even the non-magical people had legends about him. He had not realized that Merlin had been an actual historical figure and gone to Hogwarts to boot.

"So he was real then?" asked Harry, unable to contain his excitement. While he would vehemently deny it to anyone who asked, Harry's favorite stories had always been about Arturian Legend, particularly about Merlin due to how influential the man had been in his life. At least, if the stories told about him were to be believed.

"Yes, though not in the way you are thinking," the hat said. "While Merlin was indeed the adviser to Arthur during the time of Camelot, none of the stories you have read hold any truth, beyond his role as an adviser." There was a moments pause, before the Sorting hat began speaking once more. "Now then, let us continue with the Sorting," the hat started again. "As unfortunate as it is, I am unable to determine where to sort you. Unlike Merlin, you possess all the traits of the Founders in equal amounts. No one trait is anymore prevalent than another."

"So how should we proceed?" asked Harry, worried. He wasn't sure what it meant that he could not be sorted. If the hat would not place him, how would he get into his house?

"Ah, now this is where the fun comes in," the hat said. "You see, because you possess an equal amount of traits that all four of the founders cherished most, I cannot choose where you belong. That does not, however, mean that *you* can't."

Harry took a moment to ponder the hat's words. "So, you are telling me I get to decide which house I go into?"

"Yes."

Closing his eyes Harry went through all the information he had on the four houses, and which one would best suit his plans.

He immediately discarded Hufflepuff. Harry had none of the prejudices against the house like other people, but due to the reputation it had of belonging to cowards and lazies it was the most ill-suited house to be in to accomplish his goals. Not even the challenge of turning Hufflepuff into a house the others respected was enough to make him see the benefit in going there.

Slytherin was equally out. While Harry would enjoy the challenge of changing the house from the inside out and showing the other houses that the house of snakes was not a den of dark wizards, it would take more time than he cared to spend on it. Time that could be better spent working towards his goals.

That left Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. Both houses had their merits. Ravenclaw was generally considered a neutral house. The ones who went there preferred to observe the other houses and make their decisions based upon those observations. On the other hand, Gryffindors were known for being at the forefront of anything going on around the castle. They were the ones in the spotlight, so to speak.

Both also had their disadvantages, however. Most people in Ravenclaw were considered bookworms. This meant the people of that house had a reputation of being more than a little anti-social, and if he tried to change the status quo it might alienate him from both his house and those outside of it. Going there meant any plans he made could backfire on him. And while Gryffindor would make him seem more approachable without others being too wary, the fierce rivalry between the house of the

brave and the house of the cunning would make getting an ally in that house exceedingly difficult.

In the end, it came down to a single question. Which house's pros outweighed their cons?

His eyes surveyed the many students from underneath the hat, before locking onto one person in particular, who sat nervously watching him like the others.

"It seems you have decided," the hat spoke up after a moments pause. "Are you sure this is the house you wish to be in? Once I sort you there is no going back."

"I'm sure," Harry said without hesitation.

"Very well," the hat began. "If that is where you wish to be, then let it be known by all that you are to be sorted into..."

And that's a wrap. This chapter is my longest so far and I hope you enjoyed it. It actually used to be a bit longer, but I took a large chunk of the Sorting Hat's conversation with Harry out. I realized that I was going a bit overboard. To be honest, I think what I still have is a bout overboard, but dammit I was having fun with that scene! I really wanted to push the 'Harry get's sorted' scene to the limits.

Anyways, hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Later's!

Animagus Animagi

Animagus Animagi

I burst through the doors to Master Wei's dojo. No one was there but the little teacher, whom I immediately hurried up to.

"I'm just like them, master! I'm just like them! I'm horrible and cruel! I've become a monster! I'm a monster! I never imagined I could be like this! All I wanted to do was protect myself but now I've become the very thing I hate and I'm not sure what I should do and I need your help and—"

I was babbling, I knew, but I couldn't stop. The words poured out, and the more I spoke the more words that continued spewing forth like a waterfall.

Master Wei held up a hand. I stopped talking.

"Calm down, young one," he said, "I cannot understand a word you're saying. Relax. Take several deep breaths, that's it, breath in, now breath out."

I did as told, breathing in deeply and then breathing out. I still felt like panicking, but Master Wei helped me calm down.

"Now," Master Wei said, "tell me what happened."

XoX

His lungs burned with each breath he took. His legs felt like they were made of led. His muscles were on fire, and every movement he made felt like someone was trying to tear his body apart. It was the ultimate form of torture.

And Harry loved every minute of it.

It was the day after the Sorting Ceremony. The sun was still hiding behind the horizon, not yet risen high enough to cast anything more than

a pale yellow light into the sky. And like most mornings, Harry Potter found himself exercising before anyone else woke up.

The morning air was crisp and cool as Harry pushed his body much harder than he usually did. Each ragged gasp that left his throat produced a light mist in the cold air of Scotland, though he knew most of it was due to his magic reacting to his overheating body. The cool morning air of Scotland combined with the elevated height made his work out this morning much more difficult than some of his other ones.

Even as his lungs heaved another ragged gasp, a smile made its way to his face. There was something to be said about pushing ones body beyond its physical limitations, of trying to break your previous boundaries. Harry always felt his best when his work outs consisted of this kind of regime.

By the time Harry finished his body was caked in sweat and his shoulders heaved as he gulped in as much oxygen as his lungs would allow.

The cool air of the morning hit his naked torso, and his pectoral muscles twitched from the contrast it presented between the cold morning air and his overheating body.

Walking over to the tree whose limb he had used for his pull ups, Harry grabbed both the towel and water bottle he'd set aside. The towel went around his neck after he used it to wipe the sweat off his body, and the water bottle was guzzled down seconds later. He took one moment to look over at the sun as it continued its slow, steady rise over the mountains, before making his way back to Hogwarts.

Traveling along the path he had memorized from last night, Harry made his way to the Gryffindor Tower. He was forced to stop several times as the stairs moved on him, and sometimes he got sick of waiting and simply worked out a new path to follow. Eventually, he made his to the portrait of the Fat Lady, a very fat woman in a pink silk dress. The Fat Lady was asleep, the deep breaths she took and the her shut eyes told him this.

Despite having seen the moving images on the Chocolate Frog he had eaten on the Hogwarts Express, Harry had been quite shocked to see

that the portraits lining the walls were all alive. The people within them moved and talked and acted just like real people. It was an amazing piece of magic—like all the magic he had seen performed—and the ever inquisitive part of his mind couldn't help but wonder how this feat was accomplished.

"Caput Draconis," Harry spoke softly so as not to wake the Fat Lady. The door swung open as the Fat Lady continued to snore, and Harry walked into the Gryffindor Common Room.

The Gryffindor Common Room was a large, circular room where Gryffindor students could relax and study in relative peace. It was full of squashy armchairs, tables, and a bulletin board where school notices, ads, lost posters, etc. could be posted. A window looked out onto the grounds of the school and a large fireplace dominated one wall. The walls were decorated with scarlet tapestries that depicted not only witches and wizards, but also various animals.

Harry recognized many of them, some were magical such as the Griffin, others were not, as was the case with the lion. The room itself wasn't bad looking; it actually was kind of cozy, though Harry was not very fond of the color. He had nothing against red and gold, but those two colors combine were just too bright and loud to have a whole room decked out in them. Still, it was his common room now, and he would be living there for the next seven years. Might as well get used to it.

Without sparing the room a backward glance, Harry headed toward one of the two doors on the opposite side of the common room. Each door led to a spiral stair case which led to a set of dormitories. One for boys, one for girls.

Harry took the one leading to the boy's dormitory.

The boy's dormitory was a circular room, much like the common room, only instead of armchairs and tables it held beds. There were four four-poster beds in total, with deep red, velvet curtains. Once more, the color scheme was gold and red.

Harry noticed that everyone else was still asleep. Dean Thomas, a dark-haired, dark-skinned boy almost as tall as Harry slept like a rock,

occasionally mumbling something incoherent under his breath. Harry thought the boy was talking about football, but couldn't be sure. Semus Finnigan, a boy of Irish descent with pale skin and sandy-colored hair lay on his back, his arms spread out and his mouth hanging wide open. And Neville Longbottom, the round faced boy, was curled up in a ball laying on his side.

Since no one was awake to see him, Harry waved his hand towards the trunk sitting in front of his bed. He smiled when the small charm he had placed upon his trunk spoke the password in a hushed tone. It was a very basic charm, one he had discovered during the summer when he looked up basic household charms. He had set up the speaking charm specifically for this instance, since he suspected—quite correctly—that he would be up long before any of his roommates were.

The trunk unlocked with a soft 'click' and another wave of his hand caused the small, rotating circular lock with the numbers one through four to move until it reached number two.

The trunk opened up as Harry directed more magic at it. One of his three sets of school robes and a large towel flew out to land in his outstretched hands.

After closing and locking the trunk, Harry made his way to the communal showers where he enjoyed a nice long soak under hot sprays of water. He came out nearly half an hour later dressed in his clothes with the towel laying over his still wet hair.

Not long after arriving back in his bedroom, Harry found himself sitting down on the couch in the common room reading *Hogwarts, A History*. It was a very interesting book, and he was nearly half-way finished with it, having read quite a bit of the book over the summer. Harry hoped to finish it before the end of the week.

As he continued flipping through the pages the sound of the door leading to one of the dormitories opening had his ears perking up.

He turned just in time to see Fred and George Weasley walking into the common room. Unlike everyone else who couldn't tell them apart, Harry knew exactly which was which. The one coming up to him on the left,

Fred, had two extra freckles on his nose, and the other one, George, had a very small, almost unnoticeable scar on the left side of his cheek.

"Fred, George," Harry greeted the two with a small nod. The two twins grinned at him as they hopped over the couch and sat on either side of him.

"Good morning, Harry," George greeted with a large smile.

"And what a wonderful morning it is," Fred added.

"Indeed, the day is young."

"The sun is shining."

"And the weather is mild."

"Which begs the question of just why you are reading on this fine morning when you could be doing something more productive?"

"Much more productive."

Harry, who was keeping his ears on the conversation as it bounced between one twin to another, gave them a raised eyebrow to show his amusement. While he had not paid any particular attention to the pair last night during the sorting, he had seen them and listened to their conversation just like he had with everybody else at his table. That, plus his earlier observations during their meeting on the Hogwarts Express let him know these two were trouble makers. It was very likely they were the 'Marauders' of this era.

"And just what could I be doing so early in the morning? Breakfast isn't until eight."

"True, very true," Fred said with nod.

George began rubbing his chin in mock contemplation. "Well, you could always think up new and inventive ways to cause mischief."

"I must concur with my dear brother," Fred added helpfully. "Why would

you want to... read." He mock shuddered. "When you could think up more and more ways to spread chaos and joy to the school?"

At those words, Harry's lips quirked up in a small, half-smile. "Aside from the fact that I don't think chaos and joy should ever be used in the same sentence again, perhaps I am just the kind of person who enjoys reading a good book in the morning instead of finding ways to get myself in trouble."

The twins gasped in mock horror.

"You hear that, Gred? He doesn't enjoy pulling pranks."

"I heard, Forge. It's shameful how these young-uns are getting more and more boring over the years."

Harry rolled his eyes, before his attention turned toward the rest of the common room. During the time he and the two Weasley's had been talking, many other Gryffindor students had been making their way down the stairs. Already he spotted many older students as they walked out of the room, most likely going to the Great Hall, and three first years: Fay Dunbar, Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom.

"Well, I do apologize for being such a bore," Harry spoke to Fred and George as he closed his book shut with a snap, shrunk it with a tap of his wand, then stood up. "I'll see what I can do about becoming more exciting in the future. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must be going."

"See yah, Harry," George said with a jaunty wave as he and his brother stood up.

"Don't be a stranger now!" added the other.

Harry shook his head at their antics, but waved all the same, before making his way over to Neville Longbottom.

"Good morning, Neville," Harry greeted with a smile. The other boy nearly jumped out of his skin when Harry spoke, and quickly whirled around to see the raven-haired youth next to him.

"Oh, Harry," Neville breathed, looking like he had just received the scare of his life. "Good morning. Did you... did you sleep well?"

"I slept quite well, thank you. And you?" asked Harry cordially.

"Oh... yeah, erm, I slept alright," Neville mumbled, and Harry almost sighed at the unenthusiastic response. Looking at him, one would never suspect this boy belonged to the house of lions. Everything from his posture to his subdued way of speaking denoted to someone lacking the necessary self-assuredness to do well in the house Godric Gryffindor had created. Neville Longbottom, Harry had determined, was a very skittish and easily frightened boy with a complete lack of self-confidence.

He was also the reason Harry decided to go into Gryffindor. As the heir to the Longbottom name and fortune, Neville would eventually inherit the title Lord of Longbottom and a seat on the Wizengamot. More to the point, his family was one of the Founding Five, which made allying himself with this boy even more imperative. Having Neville on his side after they graduate from Hogwarts would definitely be a boon politically, if nothing else.

Thus the reason Harry had decided to Sort himself into Gryffindor. Right now, Neville was an easily frightened child with no confidence. Certainly, he acted nothing like the heir to one of the Founding Five families should. Harry planned on fixing that by taking Neville under his wing and bolstering the boy's flagging self-esteem. This would ingratiate the Longbottom heir to him, thereby giving him a powerful ally once he reached his Age of Majority.

Sure, it was a little underhanded, using the boy's lack of confidence for his own gains. But Harry justified himself with the fact that he was also helping the Longbottom heir quite a bit. Not only would Neville gain Harry as a powerful ally, he would also help Neville become the kind of man other people could look up to and admire. More to the point, Neville would be able to have confidence in himself, something that Harry felt was imperative for anybody to have.

After all, if you couldn't be confident in yourself, who would be willing to have confidence in you?

XoX

During his 11-years of life, Harry had placed people into three categories. These categories, or archetypes, as it were, were not conducive to everyone, but for the most part, Harry felt that most human beings fell under one of these three categories: Sheep, Shepherds and Wolves.

The sheep were what made up the majority of the populace. They were the people who had no real sense of self beyond their unique personality. These were the people who 'followed the heard' as it were. They did things because everyone else was doing them; they followed those who had a better vision of the future than themselves—or simply had more power—and they typically followed the whims of the crowd. Generally speaking, aside from how the vast majority of people were sheep, they were fairly useless to his overall goals.

Shepherds were a just as obvious branch of people. These were the people who had vision. They were revolutionaries of their times, leaders in every sense of the word. Those who Harry had dubbed shepherds were the kind of people the sheep followed. Harry liked to think himself a shepherd—or at least a shepherd-in-training. Sort of like being a Padawan learner.

Like shepherds, the wolves were a just as obvious euphemism. Wolves were predators, stalking their prey and pouncing when least expected. They were one of the apex predators, an animal well-known for both their cunning and viciousness.

Much like the wolves of the animal kingdom, human wolves acted very similar in execution. They preyed upon the sheep, devouring them in a not-so-literal way until they had what they wanted, which sometimes led to death and sometimes didn't, though occasionally death may be preferable. So far, the only people who Harry would have considered wolves in recent years was Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

Of course, not everyone fell under these three categories. Lisa, for instance, was certainly no sheep, yet not quite a shepherd either. And she was far too nice to be a wolf. She was one of those people he could not place into a specific category, though that may have to do with her

meaning too much for him to place into a stereotype. Perhaps the most accurate way to describe her would be a partner, someone he thought of as an equal, someone who *could* be a Shepard, but had no desire to take on the roll.

Hopefully, Neville would eventually become like Lisa in time. If he wanted to succeed in any plans he might make, he needed more than just sheep who blindly followed orders.

"Do you see him?"

"The one next to the pudgy kid?"

"It's Harry Potter!"

"The boy-who-lived!"

"I can't believe he's actually going to Hogwarts!"

"Oh, he's so adorable!"

Harry Potter listened to the students he passed in the hall and watched them gawk at him like he was some kind of circus animal. He made sure to memorize each and everyone person who did and put them under the 'sheep' category, which just so happened to include pretty much everyone he passed that morning.

Really, Harry noted with some ironic form of amusement, the people in the wizarding world acted exactly like those in the muggle world. He wondered what those blood purists would think if they knew that?

They'd probably throw a fit.

"Something on your mind, Neville?" Harry asked quite suddenly. The much shorter boy walking next to him looked up from where he'd previously been staring at the ground, his face scrunched up in thought.

"It's... it's nothing," Neville mumbled, ducking his head back down to stare at the large, granite tiles on the floor.

"Neville," Harry admonished with a slightly chiding voice. "If you have a question, please don't hesitate to ask. Asking questions is a fundamental key to gaining knowledge. If you don't ask questions, you'll never learn anything worth while."

Neville looked back up at Harry in surprise. Harry just smiled in return.

"So what did you want to ask me?"

"It's just..." Neville's eyes darted around the hall, and Harry realized the boy was looking at the dozens upon dozens of people they passed, all of whom stared at Harry like he was the second coming of Merlin. "How do you do it?"

"Ignore the stares, you mean?" Harry asked for clarification. When Neville nodded, he took a moment to think before responding. "I don't; I just don't let it bother me."

Now that he'd gotten over the initial shock of his fame, he simply found the reactions too amusing to be bothered by them. There was just something funny about watching people make utter fools of themselves. It was kind of a twisted way of seeing things, but he couldn't help it.

"I don't think I could do that," Neville mumbled quietly.

"I think you could," Harry countered, once more getting a shocked stare from the boy next to him. He smiled and looked straight ahead to see they were nearing the Great Hall. "Remember this, Neville, the only thing you ever need to worry about is how you perceive yourself. So long as you are comfortable with who you are, then you need not be bothered by how other people perceive you to be."

Neville didn't say anything as they swept into the Great Hall, but if Harry were to judge by the look on the boy's face, he would have to say that his words had at least taken root in Neville's mind. Now, so long as he took Harry's words to heart, he would eventually become more confident in himself.

Of course, a little subtle reinforcement every now and again never hurt anyone.

As they entered the Great Hall, everyone inside stopped what they were doing and stared. Girls quit chattering about whatever it was the fairer sex chattered about; boys stopped talking about sports and ceased their good-natured ribbing of each other. All eyes turned to Harry and Neville.

They must have made an odd sight, the tall, athletic boy and the short boy with the round face and skittish nature. Thankfully, Neville didn't seem to be paying anymore attention to the stares, busy as he was going over Harry's advice.

Harry kept his head high and his back and shoulders straight as he walked forward with the confidence of a person completely at ease in his own skin.

Wanting to be seen as a little more approachable, he nodded in greeting to a few of the people he passed, regardless of whether they were in his House or not. This eliciting hushed whispers from many of the boy's, and excited and shy giggling from the girls. He wondered about that, but shrugged the thought off as inconsequential.

Soon he and Neville were sitting at the far corner of the Gryffindor table, and conversation picked up again, this time about him instead of whatever these people were talking about before.

Harry sat on the window side of the table, allowing him a full glimpse of the other three tables so he could observe the other students. He piled food onto his plate, mostly eggs and fruits (the healthiest food he could find there), as the jumbled noise from a hundred different voices filtered through his ears. Beside him, Neville was silently putting food on his own plate, contemplative expression still in place.

As conversations continued, Harry's eyes strayed toward the door leading to the entrance hall as more and more students poured through. From those doors his eyes caught a glimpse of red hair, and he watched as Ronald Weasley slumped into the Great Hall wearing the yellow and black colors of his house, and sat down at the Hufflepuff table.

To Harry, the boy looked disappointed, which was to be expected. The Weasley family were one of those families who were always sorted into a specific house without fail. For nearly two generations every single

Weasley who entered Hogwarts had been a Gryffindor—until now.

Harry wondered why Ron had been sorted into Hufflepuff. He would admit to not knowing the boy very well, but the ginger-haired boy didn't seem very hard working. Perhaps that meant he was very loyal? Or maybe it was a form of reverse psychology. Had the sorting hat placed Ron in Hufflepuff because he *wasn't* very hard working or loyal in an effort to make the boy understand the value of those traits?

Possible, plausible even, though Harry suspected another reason might have been due to their confrontation on the train. Perhaps it wasn't comfortable with them in the same house? He supposed it didn't matter one way or the other.

A few minutes after Ron entered the room, Harry saw Hannah and Susan walk into the Great Hall. Both had donned their school robes, which were the same House colors as Ron's. Harry stood up, drawing much attention to himself, but he ignored that and began making his way towards the two Hufflepuffs.

It was time to begin the first phase of one the plans he had concocted recently. It was a small step, but sometimes you had to crawl before you could walk, and walk before you could run. This instance was no different.

"Morning Hannah, Susan," Harry greeted the pair with a congenial smile.

"Harry!" Hannah exclaimed in pleasant surprise, while Susan's cheeks gained a light red tint. The blond, pig-tailed girl quickly regained her wits, whilst her friend shuffled a little. "Good morning."

"I trust you both slept well?" Harry said inquiringly. Hannah gave him a slight giggle.

"Yes!"

Harry smiled at Hannah's answer, then turned to look at Susan. The redhead noticed this, and her cheeks turned a shade of red that nearly matched her hair.

"I did as well," she answered in a soft voice, her eyes going from his to the floor, then back to his. "And you? Did you sleep okay?"

"Like a rock," Harry said with a charming smile. Susan looked down at her toes.

"Anyway," Harry continued after a few seconds, "I was wondering if you two would like to have breakfast with me?"

"Breakfast? With you?" Hannah's mouth worked just enough to get that much out. Susan seemed even worse off, her eyes having widened to the size of galleons.

"Am I really so awful that you wouldn't want to have breakfast with me?" asked Harry, affecting a hurt expression. Both Hannah and Susan looked at him in shock.

"Of course not," Hannah hastened to assure him that she did not find his company unpleasurable. "It's just—I mean—are we even *allowed* to sit with you. I mean, you're a Gryffindor and we're Hufflepuff. I mean, aren't we supposed to sit at our own table?"

"It's generally expected that you sit at your own table," Harry explained patiently. "But not necessary. There are no rules that state you must sit with your house, or that you can't sit with another house." When they continued to look unsure Harry decided to make a bold move, a Gryffindor move. He grabbed the pair by the hand and began leading them to his table. "So, come on. I want the first two friends I made on the train to eat breakfast with me."

Everyone watched Harry once more as he did something that had most likely never been done in Hogwarts for a long time, if ever. If there hadn't already been a smile on his face, there would have been now. Perhaps his example would be followed by those who have friends in another house. He could only hope people would eventually begin following his lead.

"Well, alright," Hannah said with a giggle, her face slightly flushed. Beside her, being silently dragged along, was a red-faced Susan, who couldn't stop staring at her's and Harry's conjoined hands. She was

blushing to the roots of her hair. "I guess we could join you for breakfast."

"Great," Harry said as he walked over to a surprised Neville. He let go of Susan and Hannah, allowing them to claim the seats across from him, while he took his original seat next to Neville.

"I believe introductions are in order." Harry cleared his throat. "Hannah, Susan, this is Neville Longbottom. Neville, this is Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones."

"Erm," Neville stuttered for a moment, but quickly jerked his hand out and held it over the table to Hannah. "Nice to meet you, Hannah."

Hannah smiled as they shook. "Nice to meet you, too."

"Susan," Neville greeted with an unsure nod. There was no hand shake involved, but unlike with Hannah, Neville spoke to Susan with familiarity. "It's good to see you again."

"Good to see you too, Neville," Susan spoke softly, as was her wont. "How is your grandmother?"

"Oh, she's doing well," Neville edged, and Harry sighed. One of the first things he had noticed about the boy was how strained he sounded when he spoke of his 'gran.' Harry had come to the conclusion that the Dowager of Longbottom was at least part of the reason Neville's was so underconfident. "How's your Aunt?"

"Auntie Amelia is fine," Susan said. "Busy, but she seems to enjoy her work."

"That's good."

Harry hummed in the back of his throat as he listened to the two. "I take it you two know each other from somewhere?" he asked curiously.

"Ah, yes," Neville stuttered a bit as he realized he'd been ignoring *the* Harry Potter. "My gran and Susan's aunt travel in the same social circles." Which Harry took to mean they were in the same political circles. It would make sense, both Longbottoms and Bones were considered

'light neutral' families; families that were light, but didn't necessarily fall in Dumbledore's camp.

Of course, that was before Alice and Frank—who were good friends with Harry's mother and father—had joined Dumbledore in the fight against Voldemort. Despite this, the Longbottoms were still considered politically neutral, and had become even more so in recent years.

"Makes sense." Harry nodded, then smoothly changed the subject. "So are you excited for our first few classes today?"

"Yes," Hannah said, her face lighting up in an excited smile. "I can't wait to see what we're going to be learning. I'm really looking forward to Charms class."

Harry smiled, and thus the conversation went along this vane. Harry made sure to ask questions to all three of his companions, mainly focusing on school and what they wanted to learn, trying to get a feel for what they would be good in and what they didn't like. He made sure to ask questions in a way that required more than a simple one word answer, and also made sure both Neville and Susan had an equal amount of speaking time as the more talkative Hannah did.

As they spoke—their conversation had turned from Hogwarts to their favorite hobbies—Professor Sprout and Professor McGonagall walked over to them, both smiling.

Well, Professor Sprout was smiling. Professor McGonagall looked like she was *trying* to smile, but couldn't quite manage it.

Pamona Sprout was a very plump woman, with a head of messy gray hair and a kind smile. She looked like the kind of woman who had a nurturing disposition and loved the outdoors.

"Five points to all four of you," Professor Sprout said. "It is good to see students seeking friendship outside of their House."

Hannah beamed at her Head of House, while both Susan and Neville gave the woman shy but happy smiles. Harry offered his own charming smile and nodded his head graciously.

"These are your schedules," Professor McGonagall spoke up, handing both Neville and Harry their schedules while Professor Sprout gave Susan and Hannah theirs. "Have a good day, Mr. Potter, Mr. Longbottom."

As the two Professors walked away, Harry peered at his school schedule. "It looks like we've got Charms first, followed by Transfiguration." He looked at the two Hufflepuffs. "What about you?"

"Potions followed by Transfiguration," Hannah answered, schedule in one hand and a muffin in the other.

Harry smiled. "Looks like we'll be sharing a class together on our first day then."

"Seems so."

After breakfast, Harry and Neville said goodbye to Hannah and Susan, then made their way to the Charms classroom.

While they walked, Harry once again had to marvel at the interior of the castle. There were exactly 142 staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to jump over. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It made getting where you wanted to go very difficult, because sometimes the door or staircase or doorway that led to a certain hallway or room at one point, might not lead to that same hallway or room during another. The people in the portraits kept going to visit each other, and Harry was sure the coats of armor could walk.

Eventually, Harry and Neville arrived at the Charms classroom. It looked very much like a lecture hall. Instead of desks lining the room in rows up front, there were long tables with chairs set on either side of the room, with another set of tables behind those that sat on a slightly raised platform, so students in the back could see over the students in front. At the end of the room, in front of a large, glass window, sat the desk Harry assumed was for the teacher.

Harry and Neville found a spot near front, close to the teacher's desk, and idly conversed while waiting for class to start, during which more and more students arrived. Before long all the tables were filled with excitably chattering first years.

Harry immediately noticed something that bothered him about this class. The Gryffindors shared this class with Ravenclaw, clearly denoted by their differing colors. The Gryffindors all sat on the left side of the room, while the Ravenclaws had taken the right.

This would need to be corrected soon. If all went well, Harry would rectify this instinctual need for house segregation. After all, he needed more allies than just those in Gryffindor, and the best way to do that was to rid everybody of this instinctive need to befriend only those people from their own house.

Soon after all of the students had filed in, a very short man with short cropped black hair that framed either side of his face, a mustache and slightly pointed ears that vaguely reminded Harry of a goblin's walked in. Perhaps the man had some goblin blood in him.

He wore the robes that denoted him as the Head of the House of Ravenclaw; blue robes with silver trim, a vest and a large pointed hat.

The class simmered down when they realized their teacher was in the room, only to start laughing when the tiny Professor had to use a stack of books and stand on his desk to be seen by everyone. The short man didn't seem bothered by this, however, and merely smiled congenially as he waved his hands for silence.

"It is a pleasure to see you all this morning," the Professor began what looked to be his start of the term speech. "As my Ravens already know, my name is Filius Flitwick, and I will be your Charms Instructor for the duration of your stay here at Hogwarts. I hope we can all get along and have fun while learning one the main subjects we teach here. And please, do not hesitate to ask me any questions you may have. You won't learn anything if you don't ask questions."

His small speech done, the diminutive professor began taking roll. Harry listened to each name as it was called, and observed those students,

taking careful note of each one and keeping mental tabs on his observations. When Professor Flitwick got to Harry's name, the man gave an excited squeak and tumbled off his stack of books and out of sight, eliciting much laughter from the students.

Harry did not laugh, but he did smile. He suspected that the professor had done that on purpose to take attention away from him. It was just a hunch, and he had no real proof, but was nevertheless grateful. It was hard to learn when people were gawking at you.

Now all he had to do was see if this class met his expectations.

After Charms Harry and Neville met up with Hannah and Susan on their way to Transfiguration. After shared greetings the four entered the classroom and, at Harry's insistence, sat down together with Harry in between Susan and Neville, and Hannah taking a seat on Susan's left side. The group of newly formed friends then conversed about how their first classes went.

Many of the other students present stared at them strangely, like they were expecting some kind of scandal to happen any moment. Their wide, disbelieving eyes making it seem as if seeing people from separate houses conversing had never happened before. Harry had the feeling it most likely hadn't—not in this day and age, at least.

He was a bit curious at their shock, though. These students were all first years like him, so they shouldn't have any of the house biases others did. So why were they acting like the idea of two Hufflepuffs sitting with a pair of Gryffindors was unfathomable?

Maybe it had something to do with their parents. He didn't know, and it probably didn't matter. Harry was sure that, given time, things would change.

"Where do you think our professor is?" asked Hannah as she took a look around. Most of the desks were now filled up with students, all of them chattering excitedly—after the initial shock of seeing students from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff sitting together, most of the other students seemed to just accept it and now spoke amongst themselves. Yet she could not find their teacher.

"Who knows," said Harry, his eyes straying to the cat with the strange rectangular markings around its eyes sitting on the teacher's desk.

"What's with the cat?" asked Neville, having spotted the feline perched on the desk as well. "You reckon she's Professor McGonagall's familiar or something?"

Hannah looked over towards the black tabby cat, then shrugged.
"Maybe."

Harry frowned. There was something off about that cat. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but something about that feline just did not remind him of a cat.

It was probably the stern glare the thing was giving everyone.

About five minutes after the bell rang, signaling a start to the class, Ron Weasley and another boy, Zacharias Smith, a boy with blond hair and brown eyes, rushed into the room.

"Good, Professor McGonagall's not here yet, so we won't get into any trouble for being late," Ron said, breathing heavily, Zacharias nodding his head in agreement but not speaking.

Just then, the cat that had been sitting on the desk leapt into the air. Harry and the other students watched in awe as the cat began to shift in mid-air, changing from a tabby cat into a person. Arms and legs stretched and expanded, claws became hands, fur became clothes and before long Professor McGonagall was standing in front of the shocked crowd of first years, directing a stern glare towards the two Hufflepuff boys.

"Think again, Mr. Weasley," the strict-looking professor said. "That will be five points from Hufflepuff for the both of you for being tardy. Now sit down before I dock more points."

Ron and Zacharias hurried to their seats, properly cowed by the stern woman. Harry mused that it probably had something to do with Professor McGonagall's glare. It was very intimidating, as he could attest to.

"Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you

will learn at Hogwarts," Professor McGonagall soon began, her voice just as stern as her expression. "Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned."

Then she waved her wand and the students watched in awe as her desk changed into a large, pot-bellied pig. Even Harry was not immune to feeling impressed by the display of magic. While he could transfigure one object into another, he'd never done such a large-scale transformation, and never transformed an inanimate object into an organic one. He could only imagine how complex that kind of magic was. It was very unlikely they would be getting into anything that complicated for several years at least.

Another wave of her wand and Professor McGonagall changed the pig back into a desk. She then proved Harry's thoughts on not learning anything very complex correct by setting them up with the task of transfiguring a matchstick into a needle.

Harry didn't do anything at first, choosing instead to glance around at the other students struggling with the task. Neville had a look of utmost concentration, his eyes and nose scrunched up almost painfully as he waved his wand at the matchstick which just did not change into a needle. Susan and Hannah were likewise not getting anywhere. In fact, the only person who seemed to be making any progress was Hermione Granger, whose match seemed to ripple for a second before going still, unchanged.

It hadn't taken very long for Harry to decide just how well he wanted to do in his classes. Many people were already holding high expectations of him thanks to his title as the Boy-Who-Lived, and while that did bother him some, it also provided him with the perfect excuse to not hold back.

After all, if people were expecting him to be great, he might as well show them just how high he could shoot those expectations out of the water.

Holding his wand in his hand, Harry went back to his matchstick. Almost absently, he waved his wand at it, and watched in satisfaction as it near instantly morphed into a needle. Another wave of his wand had it changing back into a matchstick. It was very easy to do. He'd been doing

small time transfigurations like that for two and a half years now.

Deciding to give himself a challenge, Harry began adding extra features to the needle. Sometimes he would make the point longer, other times he would make the head larger. He changed the needles base composition to copper, brass, silver, iron and back to steel. By the time Harry was finished, he had made a needle in Gryffindor colors with a decently complex lion head for the shaft.

"How are you doing that?"

The question had Harry stopping his work and looking over at Hannah. The girl, along with Susan, stared at him in shock and just a hint of envy. Neville, too, seemed to have stopped working and was now eying Harry's needle in undisguised awe.

Harry blinked. His eyes almost widened but he stopped himself. Was this it? His chance to shine? To show his new friends and class what he could do? To prove himself to other magical children and his teachers? How exciting!

He cleared his throat.

"Transfiguration is all about focus and visualization; you can't just wave your wand, say an incantation and expect the matchstick to turn into a needle," Harry began, assuming a very minor note of lecture. "You have to picture it changing in your mind, literally visualize the change happening as you cast the spell." He noticed the three still looked confused, so said, "Try taking the spell in steps."

"Steps?" asked Neville, who had the least amount of success with his transfiguration.

"Yes," Harry said. "Try changing the match into a needle using smaller steps. First off, ask yourself what needs to change? What's different about the matchstick from the needle? You have the thickness, the point and eye of the needle, the shaft, and the material. It doesn't matter which order you make the changes, but when I cast the spell I change the thickness first, then the material, then I'll transform the head of the match into the needles eye and finally the other end into the point. By following

it in smaller steps, you don't have to try and focus on the whole item changing at once, and that allows you to get each point right."

It had taken him a long time to work this out; he had first discovered transfiguration when he accidentally turned a baseball Duddley had thrown at him into a stiropore toy. He eventually managed to reverse engineer his steps and came up with this method, using small objects like pens, pencils and footballs as test subjects.

Those poor, poor footballs. They were never the same after that.

"That is a very impressive display of knowledge and magic, Mr. Potter," a voice came from the front. Harry looked up to see Professor McGonagall standing before him.

Most of the other students stared at him in unmasked amazement. The only one who didn't seem to quite share their sentiment was Hermione, who didn't look pleased.

"Twenty points for Gryffindor, ten for getting the spell right, and another ten for the enlightening and knowledgeable explanation," Professor McGonagall said, giving him a rare smile.

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry said with a small nod, wondering if he might have gone a bit overboard. When he explained anything, especially anything involving theories he'd come up with through his own hard-earned research, he tended to get... a little too passionate at times.

"And since you can clearly do this, perhaps I should give you a more advanced task," Professor McGonagall began, but Harry interrupted her.

"Actually, I was thinking it might be a good idea if I went around and helped out some of the students who were struggling," Harry suggested. Professor McGonagall looked surprised by his offer, but soon her lips turned into that smile-grimace he was coming to recognize that told him she was proud.

"An excellent idea, Mr. Potter. You may assist your fellow students for the rest of your time in my class. And take fifteen more points for Gryffindor."

"Thank you, Professor."

And so went the rest of class. Harry helped students who appeared to be having trouble. By the end of the class, he had managed to walk both Hannah and Susan through the steps he'd devised and they had managed to change their matchsticks into needles, though Susan's looked better than Hannah's. Neville had gotten close, and only needed to fix the head, while Seamus' had inexplicably blown up when he tried to transfigure it. Dean changed the matchstick's tip into a point, but not much else. On the other hand, Sally-Ann Perks, a Hufflepuff with light brown hair and eyes, also turned the match into a needle. The only other person who accomplished that task was Fay Dunbar, who sat beside Pavarti Patil and Lavender Brown, two girls who were far too giggly to actually make much headway when Harry tried to help them.

He had even gone out of his way to help Ron a bit, though the boy seemed leary of him. Not that Harry could blame him—he would be wary, too, if someone who had verbally reamed him was suddenly being so helpful. Still he tried, and that's what mattered to Harry.

The only person Harry had not been able to help was Hermione Granger, who had refused to use his unorthodox methods under the claim that it was not in the book they'd been assigned, and therefore was not the proper way to do transfiguration. Harry assumed the girl's real reason for not wanting his help was jealousy. From what he had seen of Hermione so far, the bushy-haired witch was used to being at the top of her class, and to see someone doing better than her had sparked her competitive streak. It was unlikely she would accept help from him.

In the end, she had only managed to change the matches color and gain a pointed tip, a fact that seemed to humiliate her. By the end of class she looked like she was just a few seconds from crying.

Harry might have felt pity for the girl, but considering it was her own pride that spurned his help, felt nothing more than exasperation. It wasn't like he could do much anyway. One could only help those who wanted it, and Hermione Granger clearly did not want his help.

When class finally ended, Harry stood up with the rest of his friends, but

rather than leave, turned to them and said, "you three go on ahead to lunch without me. I'll meet up with you in a few minutes."

They looked at him for a second, but decided to just go along with it and said goodbye before heading out the door.

With everyone gone, Harry walked up to Professor McGonagall, who looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "Can I help you, Mr. Potter?"

"Yes, actually," Harry said with a polite, inquisitive smile. "I wanted to ask you about your ability to turn into a cat."

It had been on his mind ever since he'd seen it. He knew what it was, of course; Sirius could change into a dog and Harry had even ridden on his back before he and his parents had gone into hiding. And he knew that his father had the ability to transform into an animal, though he'd never seen it before.

Professor McGonagall's other eyebrow joined its bretheren in being raised. "You mean my animagus ability?"

Harry gave her a nod.

"Yes, I was wondering if you could tell me more bit about it."

The truth of the matter was he only knew a little bit about animagus transformations. That being that it was the ability for a human to transform into an animal, and that his dad, Sirius and another of his dad's friends named Peter Pettigrew, had become animagi sometime in their third year.

Harry was interested in learning to become an animagus, not only to honor his dad, but also because of how useful the ability sounded. And to prove himself the best, Harry had every intention of becoming an animagus before this year was over.

Professor McGonagall looked at the boy in surprise before that small, almost imperceptible smile found its way onto her face. "You really are your parents son, Mr. Potter. Your father was quite gifted in transfiguration, much like you seem to be, and you have your mother

inquisitiveness."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said with a genuine smile. It was hard not to feel good at being compared to his parents, especially from someone who clearly thought so highly of them.

"Very well," Professor McGonagall said, "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to give you some information on animagi. What would you like to know?"

"Everything," Harry said almost immediately, before he began firing off all the questions he had with barely contained excitement. "What kind of animal transformations are there? Are they fixed? Or can you transform into any animal in the animal kingdom? Does becoming an animagus offer any benefit to the user beyond the transformation itself? Just how does one become an animagus in the first place? Also—"

"Slow down, Mr. Potter." Professor McGonagall interrupted his rapid-fire series of questions with the air of someone on the verge of being completely overwhelmed. "I can see you have a lot of questions, more than I initially thought. Tell me, are you interested in becoming an animagus?"

"Of course," Harry said. "Who wouldn't?" At seeing her stern and skeptical look, Harry hastened to add. "Though, I doubt I could accomplish it right now. It sounds very difficult, but I figured if I could learn everything there is to know about becoming an animagus, I would have a headstart for when I actually begin attempting the process."

Professor McGonagall stared at Harry for a few, long seconds. Seconds which almost felt like hours to Harry. For a moment, he thought he might have overstepped his bounds, but after a few seconds, the stern teacher walked over to a small bookcase and ran her index finger across the spines of the books on it. Her finger stopped at one of them, and she pulled out it of the bookcase, before walking back over to him and holding it out in offering.

He took the book from her and looked down at its front cover. It was titled, *A Guide to Discovering Your Inner Animal* by *Morgana le Fay*. His eyes widened when he saw the author.

"This was written by Morgana le Fay," he breathed, turning wide eyes to Professor McGonagall. If he didn't know any better, he would almost say she was smirking at him. "The Morgana le Fay? The half-sister of King Arthur, infamous Dark Witch and quite possible Merlin's most bitter enemy?"

"You seem surprised," Professor McGonagall said, her smirk now undeniable. "Morgana Le Fay was a student at this school, much like Merlin himself."

"I didn't know," Harry said in shock. While a part of him felt silly for not having come to the conclusion that, if Merlin had been a student at Hogwarts, surely Morgana must have been as well, he still couldn't help but feel a sense of astonished perplexity.

"That book will tell you everything you wish to know about animagi and how to become one yourself," Professor McGonagall said, her smirk being replaced by her stern glare. "That book is a part of my personal collection, and I expect you to not only bring it back when you are finished, but to bring it back in perfect condition. It is not lightly that I am giving this to you, Mr. Potter."

Harry looked down at the book with newfound reverence. When he looked back at Professor McGonagall, his smile was quite possibly one of the brightest he'd ever given anyone.

"Thank you very much, Professor," he said, bowing slightly at the waist. "I promise to take excellent care of your book, and return it in the same condition it was given."

"See to it that you do." Professor McGonagall's stern look was slightly butchered by her smile. "Now, best be off with you, Mr. Potter, lest you miss the rest of your lunch."

"Right." Harry gave her one last nod before hurrying out the door, the book on animagus transformation in his hands. He could hardly wait to see what knowledge this book contained.

I get the feeling I might catch flack for having put Harry into

Gryffindor, but honestly, I don't really care. I gave one of my biggest reasons for him deciding to be placed there in this chapter, and will give a few more later on in the story, but if people can't accept it then that's their problem.

Besides, much as people complain about a GryffindorHarry being cliched, the fact of the matter is stories that start during his first year rarely ever feature a Harry in Gryffindor. I have four stories in my favorites list that start at Harry's first year, A Change Encounter, Harry Potter and the Children of Change, Sacrificial Second Chance, and Rise of the Potters. Of those four, three of them feature a RavenclawHarry with the other being SlytherinHarry. So Neyah!

That's all I have to say on that. Accept it or don't, I won't be shedding any tears either way.

Potions, Snakes, and a Grudge

Chapter 12: Potions, Snakes, and a Grudge

Thanks to the book Professor McGonagall had given him, Harry's first magical project had been determined. The ability to transform into an animal whenever he wanted without the use of a wand not only sounded incredibly useful, but also sounded like a great magical and intellectual exercise.

That night Harry read as much of the book as possible. It was a very large book, not quite the size of *A History of Magic*, but definitely larger than the standard school tomes he had seen. It would probably take him somewhere around week or two to finish reading, especially since he could only afford to read it at night before he went to bed.

This was because he not only wanted to continue spending time with Hannah, Neville and Susan—whom he found himself getting along with quite well despite his initial reasons for befriending them—but he also wanted to continue enhancing his reputation as a polite and helpful young man in order to facilitate more respect from his peers and the teachers. It was necessary for him to present this image to everyone at Hogwarts since he was so famous and everyone had their eyes on him.

Still, even if he was only able to read the book at night, Harry knew he would make good progress. Thanks to his eidetic memory he could read around 100-pages per hour and still be capable of remembering everything. So far he had managed to read just a little under eight chapters of the book.

What he had read was quite fascinating. Becoming an animagus was one of the most complicated and difficult feats of transfiguration to accomplish. Often times it took years for someone to become an animagus, which was why so few people ever bothered becoming one.

According to the book, becoming an animagus required several steps. The first was discovering ones 'inner animal,' which all witches and wizards apparently had. Basically, someone's inner animal was the

animal they were most connected to based on a combination of key factors, such as physical features and personality traits.

Sirius was the perfect example of this. Harry's mother had always told the man that his dog transformation was perfect for him, since both would hump just about anything with two legs.

Morgana had explained that there were two ways for someone to discover their inner animal. The first way was done via meditation to connect with ones inner animal. This process was long and arduous, and also half the reason becoming an animagus took so long. It not only required years of meditation, but also a mastery of Occlumency, the rare skill to defend ones mind from intrusion. This was because Occlumency not only defended the mind from external influences, but also organized the mind in such a way that it was easier to connect with oneself.

According to Morgana, only those with a clear mind could connect with their inner animal, and only those who mastered Occlumency could take on that animal's form without losing their mind to said animal's instincts.

This was another reason it took so long to become an animagus using this method. Occlumency was not only a very rare skill, but also one that took years to master on own. Morgana's book stated that mastering Occlumency normally required four to five years of intense training under a master, and discovering ones inner animal took another two to three years. That meant if someone wanted to become an animagus using this method, it would take six to eight years all told.

There were, of course, advantages to using this method. One of those advantages was having a much closer connection to ones inner animal. This led to the witch or wizard in question not only having an easier time of their transformation, but also gaining traits of their animal outside of their animal forms.

A good example of this would be Morgana herself, who had used this method to become an animagus. Her form had been that of a bird—a raven to be more precise, and it had given her several unique traits and abilities she could access outside of her animagus transformation.

One of her abilities had been those of enhanced eyesight. While ravens

didn't have the eyes of, say, a hawk or an eagle, they still had incredibly sharp vision. Much sharper than those of a human. Morgana's book stated that after becoming an animagus she had been able to see objects such as buildings, people, animals and plants with extreme clarity up to fifty miles away outside of her animagus form.

Another talent she had gained was the ability to feel air currents. It was a little known fact to those who had not studied zoology, but when a bird flew, they did so by riding air currents, not just flapping their wings. This was especially true during long distance migrations. How else could their ability to travel hundreds of miles without tiring be explained?

This particular ability, while not sounding very useful at first, had actually enhanced Morgana's skill with elemental wind magic to nearly unheard of levels. Harry had no clue what kinds of powers and abilities she had with wind magic; the book didn't say, but it was definitely an interesting little fact and made him wonder what kind of powers he might gain from his own animagus form.

However, it was not those powers that truly captivated Harry's attention. While those abilities sounded incredible, what really gotten him interested was Morgana's ability of partial animagus transformation. Morgana le Fay had the ability to partially transform specific parts of her body into her animagus form, while retaining her human form in others. One of the powers she'd been well-known for, in fact, was her ability to transform her arms into wings and take flight by creating wind currents underneath her.

It was that ability, more than any other, that convinced Harry to become an animagus this way, and not using a potion to discover ones inner animal, as most people did. He didn't know what his animal was, but whatever it was, he was quite certain that the abilities he could gain from complete mastery would prove far more useful than simply using the potion.

Of course, there was far more to just discovering ones inner animal that went into becoming an animagus. Becoming one not only required a lot of time just for a person to discover their animal form, but also required a lot of skill in transfiguration.

Morgana had written that in order to become an animagus, there were two branches of transfiguration one needed to obtain mastery of. Human Transfiguration: the ability to transfigure a human into another object entirely, and Cross-Species Transfiguration, which was the ability to transfigure a person or animal into a different animal.

Both sub-branches of Transfiguration were required to become an animagus. It was just another reason so few people ever became one. Transfiguration was one of the most difficult and complex branches of magic. Even the slightest mistakes could lead to disastrous consequences, including permanent transfigurations and even death. For this reason most witches and wizards preferred branches of magic that were considered safer, such as Charms.

Harry was not most wizards. He had every intention of not only becoming an animagus, but mastering all branches of magic to such a degree that no one would ever question that he was one of the best and most powerful wizards in the entire world.

The morning after receiving Professor McGonagall's book, Harry went through the same routine he'd done yesterday. However, even during his work out, Harry's thoughts remained on what he had read the night before. Even when he and Neville made their way to the Great Hall for breakfast, Harry was still thinking of how he would become an animagus.

How long would it take? He wondered. Morgana had projected it would take six to eight years by going through the process she had used, but that did that necessarily mean it would take him that long?

While he hadn't known about Occlumency until the Sorting Ceremony, the truth was he'd been practicing meditation since he was seven, and thanks to his need to shield his mind from his memories in order to function as a normal human being, he had practically mastered the art of clearing his mind ahead, which was the key to mastering Occlumency.

Did that mean he had already mastered Occlumency? The sorting hat had told him that he would have easily pushed it from his mind had it not spoken to him. But did that mean he would have been able to shield his mind from someone who had mastered legillemency?

He didn't know. Unfortunately, there was no way he could know. Not without finding a master Legilimens and asking them to take him on as an apprentice. Even more unfortunate was that he didn't know anyone who knew the art. He assumed that Dumbledore might. After all, the man was the most powerful wizard in magical Britain, but he wasn't entirely sure he trusted the man. Not after the Headmaster had left him on the doorstep of his magic hating relatives like a bottle of milk on a cold November night.

Harry supposed that just meant he would have to make do with what he had. He was positive he could discover his inner animal on his own before the start of the new year, it would just take time.

His only real problem was actually becoming an animagus once he found his inner animal. From what he had read of the books he'd bought during the summer about Transfiguration, Cross-Species Transfiguration was a fourth year skill, and Human Transfiguration was a N.E.W.T. Level skill, meaning it was only taught to those who managed to get an O on their O.W.L. Exams in fifth year. To make matters more difficult, in order to become an animagus one had to combine Cross-species Transfiguration with Human Transfiguration, which was above N.E.W.T. level magic that required Mastery of Transfiguration. All in all, if Harry wanted to become an animagus before the end of the school year, he had his work cut out for him.

Thankfully, he did have an advantage most others didn't. His mum's journals. While his mother had never become an animagus, she had described the process his father, James Potter, and his friends had gone through to become animagi. It gave an added perspective to what he had read from Morgana's book.

According to her, James Potter had been a genius when it came to Transfiguration. One of those once in a generation prodigies. In fact, it had been James who had first gone through the process of becoming an animagus, and it had been him who taught it to Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew. His mother had written that James had been so good at Transfiguration that he not only became an animagus during his third year at Hogwarts—an until then unheard of feat—but had gained Mastery under Professor McGonagall's tutelage *before* he graduated from

Hogwarts.

That would also explain why Professor McGonagall had been willing to lend him her book, as well as why she seemed to have a soft spot for him despite this only being their second time meeting—he didn't count the times she had been around him as a baby. James had been her favorite student, despite the amount of trouble he and his band of misfits got into.

"Are you alright, Harry?"

Harry's attention snapped back to reality at the sound of Neville's voice. He looked at the round-faced boy walking with him on his left and gave a polite smile.

"I'm fine, Neville," Harry assured the boy. "I was just thinking about what we learned in class yesterday."

"Oh." Neville looked unsure for a second, but then plowed on. "So what do you think of our classes so far?"

"They're definitely intriguing. Way more interesting than the muggle classes I took in primary school," Harry said with a chuckle. Of course, learning magic was infinitely more interesting than learning math and English. Though he would admit to loving science and history just as much as magic.

"So what's your favorite class?"

"How could I possibly pick a favorite?" asked Harry, this time with a genuine smile. "Aside from the fact that we've only had two classes, there's no way I could choose one branch of magic over another. From what I've seen so far, they're all just too diverse to really compare them anyway." He looked at Neville with an inquisitive stare. "What about you, do you have a favorite?"

"Well, we haven't really had the class yet, but..." Neville blushed a bit and ducked his head. "I've always had an interest in studying Herbology."

"Nothing wrong with that," Harry said, much to Neville's shock.

"Herbology is a useful skill, especially for potion brewers, and I hear that

owning your own business in growing and selling plants as potion ingredients can be very lucrative."

It was actually one of the suggestions Ragnok had made to him, though Harry had no idea how he would go about starting that. Perhaps with Neville's help he could get started. Maybe he could even gain himself a business partner if he pushed Neville in the right direction.

"So then, you want to learn about magical plants then?" he asked.

"Yes." Neville nodded. Now that he realized Harry wasn't going to make fun of him for his love of Herbology, he seemed to have gained confidence. "I actually own a greenhouse at home where I grow my own plants. I don't have a lot right now. Gran said she wouldn't allow me to have any of the more dangerous ones until my third year at Hogwarts, but I do have a few that are pretty rare."

"The sounds sensational. Herbology is a commendable field of study," Harry praised, causing Neville to blush in a bit of embarrassment. The boy probably hadn't been given much praise as a child. He wouldn't be so under confident otherwise.

It looked like it was up to Harry to up the boy's confidence to where it should be. That was fine with him. If Harry was going to have Neville as an ally, he wanted someone who could make informed decisions without needing a prompt in the right direction, and he needed people who would challenge and push his beliefs by playing devil's advocate.

One could not become great unless they were challenged by those around them, including their allies.

"Hiya, Harry, Neville!"

A distinctly feminine voice reached their ears, and both turned around to see Hannah and Susan walking up to them. The blond, pig-tailed girl was waving to them, a large smile plastered on her face. Meanwhile, Susan walked slightly behind her with a shy, embarrassed smile directed at them.

"Good morning, Hannah," Harry greeted with a congenial smile.

Hannah's bright smile greeted him as the two girls stopped in front of them. He then turned his attention to the other girl. "And good morning to you as well, Susan?"

"Good morning. Harry." Susan seemed to be doing much better in his presence than she had yesterday. No longer was she looking down at her shoes when she spoke to him. Instead, she was actually making a decent effort at maintaining eye contact.

Her face was still nearly as red as her hair, though.

With the addition of the two Hufflepuffs, Harry and Neville made their way into the Great Hall. It wasn't that crowded yet, though it looked like a little more than half the school was already eating, there were still quite a few seats available for them. Most of the people who had yet to come in were those who enjoyed sleeping in, like Seamus and Dean.

"Why don't we sit at the Hufflepuff table today," suggested Harry. The other three looked at him in identical masks of confusion, then at each other. After a shared shrug, they followed Harry's suggestion and made for the Hufflepuff table. Even though they had only been around him for one day, they were beginning to get used to the boy-who-lived's eccentricities.

By this point in time, a lot of people in the school knew about Harry's friendship with Susan and Hannah, so while their walk down the Great Hall garnered some attention, most seemed to run more along the lines of idle curiosity than outright gawking.

Which was good, because it meant people had already gotten used to them. That was one of the first steps towards acceptance.

As Harry sat down at the table with Susan on his left, Hannah on his right, and Neville on her right, several heads turned to look at them.

"Harry!" Sally-Ann Perks gasped in surprise while Ernie Macmillon and Megan Jones gaped. "What are you doing here?"

Harry offered the girl a polite, indulgent smile. "I decided that, since Hannah and Susan were kind enough to indulge me by sitting at the

Gryffindor table yesterday, it was only right that Neville and I returned the favor."

"Oh." Sally-Ann Perks mouth formed a slight 'o' shape as she spoke. "Well, I guess that makes sense."

"So Harry," Hannah said, diverting his attention away from the other girl and onto her. Sally-Ann Perks puffed up her cheeks slightly, but didn't get to say anything when her friend, Leanne, began teasing her about wanting to spend time talking to Harry Potter.

Harry only spared the girls a curious glance, wondering if this was something girls did to bond with each other. The thought was shrugged off a moment later and he refocused all of his attention on Hannah.

While Sally-Ann Perks began blushing and sputtering, Hannah had continued talking.

"We have Charms class today, think you can give us some advice?"

"I wouldn't worry about the class too much yet," Harry told her. "Right now you'll just be getting an introduction into what you're going to be learning this year. The only spell you'll be taught is a simple color changing charm, which is very simple to accomplish. You should be able to get it right on the first try, that's how easy it is."

Even though Hannah was the one who asked the question, all of the first year Hufflepuffs near him leaned in to hear what he had to say. They remembered how Harry had done in Transfiguration. If he was even half as good in Charms as he was in that class, then it would be wise to listen to him.

"Speaking of classes," Hannah started. "What class do you guys have?"

"Double Potions with the Slytherins."

Hannah grimaced. "Ouch, good luck with that. I've heard that class is horrible."

"Oh?" Harry blinked. "What's so bad about it?"

"It's the Professor," surprisingly enough, it was Susan who spoke up. Harry, Neville and Hannah turned to look at her. She flushed at the attention, but screwed up her courage and continued. "One of the older students told us that the Potions teacher is really mean to everyone who isn't in Slytherin. Apparently, he's their Head of House."

"So we have a biased teacher who hates anyone not of his house." Harry frowned. "Surely you're exaggerating, right? I can't imagine the Headmaster allowing someone so biased to teach here."

"Well, maybe, I don't know," Susan admitted softly. "I'm just telling you what we were told. I can't help but think it's true, though. All of the older students who heard us talking agreed."

Harry's frown deepened. He would admit to being worried about what he'd told. Potions was actually one of the classes he was looking forward to the most. It would be very disappointing to have his expectations ruined by a biased teacher.

XoX

Potions, unfortunately, did turn out to be a major disappointment.

Harry and Neville entered class with the other Gryffindors. The classroom was located in the dungeons. It was dark, dank and there was a cold draft blowing in from somewhere.

The room smelled of fumes, almost clogging the senses. Everywhere Harry looked he could see shelves upon shelves lined with potions ingredients. Some he recognized; many he didn't. He saw powders, slimes, shells that looked like they belonged to some kind of animal. A few jars even had shrunken and shriveled up heads in them.

The Slytherin students were already there. Harry recognized Daphne and Tracey sitting together at a table near the back of the Slytherin section. Blaise sat with Theodore Knott, a weedy looking kid with beady eyes and stringy black hair. A little ways over, Malfoy was surrounded by Greg and Goyle, as well as Pansy Parkinson, a girl with black hair and a pug-like nose.

Harry and Neville sat in the middle of the group of Gryffindors. At first he had considered sitting in the front like he usually did, but after hearing about how the Potions professor was rumored to behave, had decided that it may be safer to sit somewhere more inconspicuous.

Wanting to be prepared, Harry pulled out several of the shrunken objects he had taken to class with him, his cauldrons and brass scales, the book *Magical Drafts and Potions*, and a muggle notepad where he stored all of his notes on the potions he had worked on over the summer, along with a calligraphy pen and his potions kit.

Neville also brought out the items he'd bought, but didn't have nearly as many supplies as Harry.

A little while after everyone had entered and got seated, the potions Professor swept into the room, his robes billowing out behind him, making him look like some kind of oversized bat.

Severus Snape was a very pale man with a long, hooked nose and shallow black eyes. His hair hung around his face and was incredibly greasy. It looked like it hadn't been washed in weeks. His finger nails were dirty, like he had never taken the time to clean them, and Harry's eyes could pick out several stains on his black robes from potions and fumes that had not been washed out. Once more, Harry questioned the personal hygiene of most adult wizards, as the man before him looked like he hadn't bathed in days.

Class started when Snape took roll. Like Professor Flitwick, he stopped at Harry's name.

Unlike Professor Flitwick, he did not seem very excited.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Potter," he said softly, with that mocking, condescending tone. "Our new—celebrity."

It was in that moment that Harry realized this class was not going to be anywhere near as pleasant as he had hoped, and would likely be even worse than he could have possibly imagined.

Draco Malfoy and his friends, Crabbe and Goyle, sniggered behind their

hands. Snape finished taking roll and then looked up at the class with eyes darker than the blackest of nights and ten times more menacing. They held a condescending quality to them that made the man look like he was staring at a bunch of ants, rather than a group of students wanting to learn.

"You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion-making," he began, his voice barely above a whisper, yet everyone in the class could hear him and watched on bated breath. Harry had to give the man credit, he knew how to captivate an audience, even if he didn't care about looking more professional. "As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Harry's eyes subconsciously narrowed. The last part of his speech had been unacceptable. A teacher was not supposed to mock and belittle his students by calling them names. It was the job of a teacher to encourage those learning under them and help facilitate understanding of the subject they're striving to teach.

Sitting beside him, Neville shook ever so slightly in fear. His eyes were wide and he looked like he wanted to hide under the desk. Two tables away from them, Hermione Jean Granger sat on the edge of her seat and was already taking notes, looking eager to prove that she wasn't a dunderhead.

"Potter!" said Snape suddenly, causing nearly half the class to jump. Harry just frowned. "What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Hermione's hand shot into the air while Harry stiffened in his seat slightly, but quickly relaxed and answered the question. "You would get a powerful sleeping potion known as Draught of the Living Death, which is said to be so powerful it makes the person who drank it seem as if they are dead."

Snape's eyes widened, surprise showing blatantly on his face. It only lasted for a second, maybe less. Harry doubted any of the students had seen it, but he had, and it was good to know he had just surprised the man who seemed to have the desire to pick on him.

"A lucky guess." Snape sneered. Harry's hand twitched where it was on the table. "Very well then, answer me this. Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezaor?"

"In the stomach of a goat, sir," Harry answered as Hermione's hand began to tremble in the air. It went ignored. "It's a stone-like object capable of curing most poisons, and is used in the preparation of many common antidotes."

Snape's nostril's flared, the only sign he gave to being upset that Harry had answered him correctly.

"What is the difference, Potter, between Monkshood and Wolvesbane?"

"There is no difference, sir," once again Harry answered the question as Hermione's hand frantically waved in the air. She was beginning to look angry. "It's the same plant, and is one of the key ingredients in the Wolfsbane potion that was created to relieve the strain of Lycanthropy during the full moon, and allows the werewolf who drinks it to retain their humanity during the transformation. Wolfsbane also goes by the name Aconite by muggle botanists."

For a long, long second, Snape stood there, staring at Harry like he was the worst kind of disease. Within the sleeves of his robes, Snape's hands clenched into fists so tightly they shook. The man looked one second away from throttling Harry.

And then the man's face went blank for a second, before he sneered. "Ten points from Gryffindor for cheating, Mr. Potter. And another ten for being an insufferable know-it-all."

Harry's body went stiff with rage. He managed to control himself, for the most part, but his eyes narrowed.

"Cheating?" he said, his tone almost questioning. "And just what makes

you think I am cheating... sir," he added at the end, the tone more condescending than he had ever used when speaking to a teacher. Not that he was even sure this man deserved to be called such.

Snape's eyes narrowed. "It's obvious to anyone with half a brain that you cheated. None of those questions are on the first year syllabus—"

"Then why did you ask them to me," interrupted Harry, drawing shocked gasps from everyone in the room and flared nostrils from Snape. "If this knowledge isn't in the first year course work, then you shouldn't have asked me those questions in the first place. And the mere fact that this knowledge isn't something a first year is supposed to know makes it equally obvious that I didn't cheat, because there is no way I could have known you were going to ask those questions, since it wasn't in the first course syllabus... *sir*." This time, there was no mistaking the condescension in his tone when he said sir.

Snape's upper lip curled as he grit his teeth. The man looked like he wanted to burn Harry to ash with his eyes.

Harry met the man's glare head on. A part of him knew this was wrong, knew he should back down and regain his composure, but Snape had pushed one button too many. These days, there were very few things in this world that upset Harry Potter, truly upset him.

Accusing him of cheating or calling him a liar was one of those things. Harry Potter never cheated. He didn't need to. Thanks to his eidetic memory he was more intelligent than anyone his age he had ever met, and more intelligent than many people twice his age. He didn't need to cheat to get good grades.

It was also a matter of pride. Harry Potter was a prideful person. To cheat meant to stain one's honor and pride. And he refused to do that. To have Snape accuse him of cheating galled him.

It was during this stare down, where everyone on the sidelines waited on baited breath, that he felt it, that familiar feeling of something trying to poke around in his head. Legillemency.

Harry could barely contain a snarl as he realized Snape was trying to

invade his mind. It was one thing for the Sorting Hat to enter his head to sort him into his house. He didn't like it, but he could accept it. It was quite another to have a teacher invading his mind because he was angry at having someone contradict him when he knew they were right.

And Harry was not going to stand for it.

Harry's magic rolled forth as he opened the floodgates to his core. His entire body became saturated in energy, which he compressed into a tiny ball within his mind.

And then he launched the magic at Snape's mind probe.

There was no subtlety in Harry's defense. It couldn't even truly be called defense. Harry's mind and magic bashed into Snape's probe with all the subtle prowess bull in a China shop. It crashed against Snape's mind probe like a middle-aged battering ram bashing against the gates of an ancient stronghold, destroying the probe like it was made of paper. So powerful was Harry's retaliation that the mental attack actually had some adverse physical effects.

Unprepared for such a powerful counter, Snape stumbled as the mind magic smacked him in the face almost literally. The attack burrowed through his mind and drove a spike of pain into his brain.

He hissed, bringing a hand up to his forehead to try and stem the pounding in his skull. It felt like someone had driven a spike through his head. His vision blurred for a second, before snapping back into focus with painful clarity.

Harry watched on, glaring at the man who dared enter his mind uninvited. He didn't know much about the mind arts. In fact, he only knew what the sorting hat had told him. But surely there was some kind of law against invading the mind of a minor? Of a student?

Snape seemed to come to. His body straightened and his hand fell away. Harry watched the man grimacing warily, waiting to see if he would be stupid enough to attack him in some way again. If he did, Harry would show him that he was not one to be trifled with. If he tried anything, Harry would break the man's nose. It wouldn't take much to knock him flat.

Harry could probably reach Snape before he even pulled out his wand.

However, Snape did nothing more to attack him. After a moment where the two stared at each other, one wary and ready to attack, the other with an unfathomable expression, Snape turned away, flicking his hand at the chalkboard where a set of instructions wrote themselves.

"Follow the instructions and begin making the potion," he said, his voice distant. He sounded like he was in pain, or suffering from a migraine. "I expect each of you to have a vial filled with the potion at the end of class. Begin now."

There were a few seconds where no one did anything. Everyone switched their gaze from Harry to Snape in confusion and shock. Harry could almost imagine what was going through their minds as they tried to come up with some comprehensible theory on what had just taken place.

He couldn't blame them; he would be confused as well if he'd just watched what amounted to a mental duel between two people.

Snape snarled. "Well! What are you waiting for!? An invitation!?"

That got everyone started. There was a great scraping of chairs as students stood up and made their way to the potions cabinet to grab their potions. Neville also tried to get up, but Harry placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I'll get them," Harry said, summoning his wand from his holster. Without deliberation he waved it over at the cabinet, and all of the ingredients the instructions called for soon floated above the heads of shocked students and made their way to Harry's and Neville's desk.

Professor Snape eyed the flying potion ingredients, his face carefully blank as he watched Harry begin setting everything up.

"I'll prepare the ingredients while you add them to the cauldron," Harry said softly to Neville as he set aside all of the items needed to prepare the ingredients. The round-faced boy nodded, the gesture seeming almost instinctive, his mind not all there. Harry flicked his wand at the cauldron as it sat over the bunsen burner to start a fire.

He picked up his notepad and flipped to the page with his instructions for the boil cure potion, which they were making, according to the board up front. The instructions were written in elegant cursive, clearly visible and easily legible. He set the instructions in front of Neville, who was still looking at him in shock.

"Use these instruction to create the potion," Harry instructed.

Neville snapped out of his stupor at Harry's words and looked at the notepad.

"Harry," he said carefully. "These instructions are different from the ones on the board."

"Yes, I would imagine so," Harry said dismissively. "I created those instruction when I was experimenting at home. Not only will the potion be of a much higher quality, but it will also cut down half the time to make it. Just follow the instructions."

Neville didn't respond at first, clearly still very confused by everything that had transpired within the last few minutes, but he seemed to hold in his curiosity and muttered a, "right," before getting to work.

As silence descended upon the classroom, with nothing but the bubbling of cauldrons and the cutting, scraping and scuffing noise of people working on their potions to break it, Harry finally calmed down. He allowed his hands to work on their appointed task, and as Harry worked in silence with Neville, he allowed his mind to wander.

Now that he was much calmer, Harry felt a hint of shame at how violently he had reacted. He should be better than this. Harry had dealt with insufferable people before. If he could deal with his aunt, uncle and cousin on a daily basis and not lose his cool, then surely he could deal with one sour teacher.

Except this man wasn't just a surely teacher with a strong amount of biased, was he? It was clear that Snape hated him for some reason, even though they had never met. From the very moment he had come upon Harry's name during roll, the man had done his best to mock and insult Harry. The potion professor's animosity for him was quite

astounding, and incredibly childish.

Which really just made Harry more ashamed of himself. He was supposed to be above responding to such childish taunts. A man who would resort to using elementary school insults and taking points was beneath responding to in a similar manner.

As Harry cleaned the horned slugs of any contaminants that might adversely affect the potion, his mind went through all it knew about Severus Snape thanks to his mother's journals.

According to his mum, she and Snape had actually been childhood friends when they were younger. They had met before being accepted at Hogwarts. Apparently, it was Snape who had informed his mother of her witch status.

When they arrived at Hogwarts, his mother had been sorted into Gryffindor and Snape went into Slytherin. Despite this, they still managed to remain friends for a long time.

During their years at Hogwarts, Snape had come under the assault of none other than the Marauders, who had taken to playing pranks on him and the other Slytherin students, though they had mostly picked on him.

Harry knew that a big part of this bullying was due to how close Snape had been to his mother. From the moment he had laid eyes on Lily Evans, James Potter had been in love with her, and had taken every opportunity he could to gain her affection. However, she had continued to spurn his advances, claiming he was an arrogant bully for picking on her friend.

Lily's spurning of his love had only pushed James to new heights of bullying, and Snape had responded to the then arrogant boy's taunts and pranks with equal fervor. This intense rivalry between Snape and James lasted until their seventh year at Hogwarts, when Lily began dating James.

However, Snape's friendship with his mother had been broken two years before that. During their fifth year, after a rather terrible prank that Lily had tried to defend Snape from, he had called her a Mudblood: a

derogatory name for someone born from muggle parents, akin to calling someone of African descent a nigger, or a Chinese person a Chink. It was one of the vilest, most insulting words you could call a muggleborn, and it had ruined their friendship permanently.

Perhaps that was why Snape hated him so much. Perhaps he saw Harry's father as the man responsible for destroying his friendship with Lily. Maybe he saw Harry as a symbol of James' victory over him.

If so, then the man was even more immature than he thought. Blaming the child for the sins of the father was incredibly childish, and to carry a grudge for so long over a man whose been dead for 11-years was even more so. Harry wondered why Dumbledore allowed a man like this to teach school children. Surely the headmaster knew that having someone so petty and petulant teaching would only create more problems in the future?

"Harry," Neville said in a voice so quiet even Harry almost missed him speak as he stirred the cauldron. The original instructions said not to while on the brewing phaset, but Harry's improved instructions called for the potion to be stirred with two clockwise stirs and one counterclockwise stir every minute for five minutes to hasten the mixing of the ingredients after adding horned slugs.

"Yes?"

"What was all that about?" asked Neville. "You know, with Professor Snape?"

"I don't know," Harry said honestly. He wasn't sure if the other boy was talking about Snape's reaction to him, or the end results of their little mental duel. In either event, he only had a small bit of knowledge on both subjects, so he wasn't really lying, even if he did have a few theories. "You'd have to ask Professor Snape."

Neville looked at Harry for a moment, before eventually nodding and returning to the potion. He took the cauldron off the fire, then added two porcupine quills that Harry had chopped up and added them to the cauldron.

As Neville began to stir, Harry debated on what he should do about man clearly couldn't be trusted with children. Equally clear was that Snape's grudge against his father still ruled his life. At the same time, Dumbledore must have a reason for keeping him at Hogwarts.

That didn't mean much to Harry, not after discovering that Dumbledore was the reason he'd been forced to live at the Dursley's, but it did mean he couldn't do much. While being the Boy-Who-Lived gave him great leeway with his peers, and could be used to further his cause politically, it would not help him win a fight against Albus Dumbledore. The man had been a leader of the light for 100-years, considered one of the most powerful wizards of the century, was looked up to, respected, and had more political acumen and pull than Harry did.

Perhaps it would be best if he did nothing for the moment, then? Yes, that seemed to be the best course of action right now. He would do nothing, and no one but him and Snape would know what had truly transpired during those few minutes. He would come to class, act exceedingly polite and not let on that anything was wrong, and he would secretly hold the fact that the man had tried to unsuccessfully invade his mind hang over the potion Professor's head like a dark storm cloud. Every time Snape saw Harry, he would know that Harry could say anything at anytime, that he could release the news that a professor of Hogwarts had attacked a student using legillemency, but for some reason wasn't. He would make the man sweat.

In the meantime, Harry would look up the school rules involving using Legillemency on a student. He would also see if some of the law books he had yet to read had anything on Legillemency and it's legalities in the magical world. Hopefully, there would be something he could use against Snape in the future, either as blackmail, or to get him fired if the man became too much of a problem.

It wasn't exactly what he wanted to do, which involved publicly humiliating Snape and having the man live the rest of his life in shame, but it was the best he could do on such short notice. It would be enough, for now. Harry was nothing if not patient.

Another chapter. I don't have much to say about it, but I hope you all

enjoyed it. Thank you for the support and reviews.

A Few Small Bumps

A Few Small Bumps

Harry frowned as he read the book titled *Legal Guide to Proper Use of Magic*. According to this book, using Legillemency was illegal unless you were a member of the Auror forces under the jurisdiction of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and using Legillemency on a minor could earn someone a ticket to Azkaban provided the minor could give solid proof that Legillemency was used on them.

This was both useful and useless information at the same time. He was pleased to discover that what Snape had done was illegal and could get him arrested. He was less than pleased to discover that he needed to have documented proof of Legillemency being used before Snape could even be brought to a trial.

What was he supposed to do? Convince Snape to sign a magically binding contract stating he had used Legillemency on a minor?

Not that it mattered anyway. Harry may have a lot of influence due to his status, but Dumbledore had more. Not to mention the man had been on the political scene for upwards of 100-years. Going up against a man like that was political suicide, even for him—especially for him since Harry was still learning the ins and outs of wizarding politics.

Even if he *could* theoretically humiliate Snape, or at least get him fired, it would take far too much time and effort, which could be better spent furthering his goals. He had no desire to fight with Professor Dumbledore trying to get the Head of the House of Slytherin kicked out, and Harry knew he would have to fight the man. There was no doubt in his mind that the Headmaster would defend the Potions professor should Harry try to charge Snape of committing a crime. He wouldn't have hired such a loathsome man if he wasn't willing to side with him when trouble came up.

That did leave him with a a problem on what to do about Snape. The man

clearly had very little in the way of moral compunctions if he could delve into a student's minds without regard to their privacy. He needed to be dealt with somehow. At the very least, Harry needed to find some way to neutralize the man's power at Hogwarts.

With a sigh, Harry decided to shelve his thoughts on Snape for the moment. He snapped the book shut, shrunk it, then pocketed it, before standing up and making his way over to Neville, who had just entered the Gryffindor common room.

The two friends shared a greeting before walking down to the Great Hall for breakfast. It was around nine o'clock when they arrived. Today was Saturday, which meant they didn't have any classes and could sleep in. Even Harry had slept in, or at least, he had lain in bed for an extra hour while organizing his thoughts.

That was one of the many disadvantages to being so well versed in Occlumency, he figured. When someone slept, their mind was usually busy filing away everything that had happened and been learned that day while the body was recovering. That was the reason people generally needed around eight hours of sleep. One half involved resting the body, the other half involved the mind.

Harry was different in that he did not need to rest his mind much, if at all. He organized and cleared his mind every night before he went to bed. If anything the act of sleeping made his mind more disorganized than it did when he was awake, which explained why Harry's body only needed four hours of sleep to run at peak efficiency.

Sometimes he cursed having such a well-organized mind.

Since it was Saturday, Harry had taken to wearing muggle clothes: blue jeans, a white undershirt and a dark green button up shirt combo. While he wouldn't deny that he did kind of like the cloaks, as they reminded him of his favorite space opera trilogy, he still preferred muggle clothing. Mainly because his non-magical clothes didn't restrict his movements like those heavy cloaks did.

They were soon joined at the Gryffindor table by Hannah and Susan, and Harry was pleased to see they hadn't needed any prompting to join them.

That meant they were growing more comfortable about not following the crowd.

"So what do you guys think we should do today?" asked Hannah as they finished piling food on their plate. She took a fork full of eggs after speaking, chewing slightly and then swallowing before she continued. "I mean, it's Saturday. We don't have any classes. We should do something fun."

"We could go exploring the castle," Susan said, her tone softer than wind chimes. Harry wondered if she would remain that demure and shy forever. Ah well. At least she wasn't blushing anymore.

"We could explore the castle," Harry began, watching the smile growing on Hannah's face. He decided to pop the girl's bubble before she could get her hopes too high. "Provided everyone's finished their homework."

"Homework? On a Saturday?" Hannah wrinkled her nose in mock disgust. The girl was clearly adverse to the idea of doing homework during the weekend. "Our homework's not due until next Thursday. We have almost a week before we need to finish it."

"Better to get it out of the way now, so you're not rushing to rushing to finish it the day before you have to turn it in," Harry said. "Trust me on this, if you wait until the last minute, your homework will be nowhere near as good as it could be."

Hannah looked like she was about to protest, but Susan cut her off.

"I think it's a good idea," the redhead said. At least she seemed to be thinking sensibly, but then, he suspected that Susan, despite her shyness, was much more grounded than her friend—a side effect of living with her aunt, he suspected. "If we finish it now, we won't have to worry about it again."

"You can't be serious, Susan," Hannah looked aghast. However, the moment she saw her friends look, which Harry noted was surprisingly stern for someone so demure, the blond girl slumped, heaving a large sigh of defeat as she hung her head. "Oh alright, I know when I've been beaten. I suppose we could head up to the library after breakfast to finish

our homework." She was silent for a moment, before mumbling a little anecdote. "The sooner we finish the better."

Harry could barely constrain a chuckle at the crestfallen look on Hannah's face. It was so reminiscent of Lisa's expression whenever he told her the same thing that he couldn't contain his amusement.

Thinking of his friend also brought back the tight pain he felt in his chest that came from no longer being near her. Still, it wasn't nearly as bad as it had been. As he suspected, it was getting a little easier to deal with; the once gaping hole in his heart had healed somewhat.

He suspected it had something to do with the three sitting with him. They were very pleasant and he enjoyed conversing with them, so much so that he was even willing to open up more than he believed he should.

It was a new experience for Harry. While he had always conversed and interacted with other people at school and sporting events, he never allowed himself to open up to anyone other than Lisa. He wondered if this had something to do with the people around him, or if it was just because they were magical like him. Perhaps a mixture of both?

It wasn't long after breakfast started that a flood of owls flew into the Great Hall. Everything from Barn Owls to Screech Owls to Tawny Owls swooped into the large hall where students and teachers were enjoying their breakfast.

Harry looked up to see that the enchanted ceiling was nearly blocked out by the large flock of nocturnal avians. His eyes picked out the many letters and parcels various owls carried as they descended toward the recipients of said items. Over at the Slytherin table, Malfoy received a large parcel filled with various wizarding candy and letters, and was currently bragging about how his father and mother were rich and only sent him the highest quality goods. Seamus and Dean had both received a letter from their parents, which somehow ended up with Dean trying to explain what football is to Seamus. And Susan received a letter from a large Eagle Owl and was currently reading it.

"Is that from your aunt?" asked Harry. Susan looked up at him from the letter and nodded, a smile on her face.

"Yes, I promised her I would write and tell her what house I was sorted into."

Harry smiled, prompting a light blush to spring to Susan's pale cheeks. "I bet she was proud to hear you were sorted into her house?"

"She was." Susan fidgeted a bit, her blush nowhere close to receding. "I... I also told her a little bit about you. She was... very pleased to hear that I'm making friends outside of my house."

Harry nodded. "She sounds like a smart woman. It's always good to have friends that come from different walks of life—or friends that belong in different houses. Diversity allows people to grow and learn in ways they couldn't if all of their friends were like-minded individuals."

That was another problem Harry had with the House system. Diversity helped people grow. When so many different people with different ideas and different ways of thinking combined their efforts together, it most often resulted in the creation of something new and wonderful. That was why scientists in the non-magical world had advanced enough to send ships into space. With like-minded individuals being segregated into separate houses, Harry feared the wizarding world would never advance like its non-magical counterpart.

Which was really a shame because magic seemed so much more versatile than science. Harry could only imagine what it would be capable of if people could put aside their differences and work together.

"You know, you sound kind of like my dad when you talk like that," Hannah informed Harry, giving him a strange look. "He's always saying similar things whenever he talked about all of the people he's met."

"From what you've told me of your father, he's fairly well-traveled," Harry said with a hum "And considering he works with a lot of different people due to being in the wine industry, he's probably a lot more open-minded as well."

"I guess," Hannah said, shrugging. "I've never really thought about it, but then, I've never really seen what he does when working. I mean, sure, mum and I have traveled with him during the summer, but it's not like we

actually go near the vineyards. Usually, mum and I just go into the nearby towns and do some sightseeing and shopping."

Harry nodded, understanding that Hannah probably wasn't interested enough in her father's business to go with him while he worked. It was that way with most children. At least, it seemed that way. Lisa had never been interested in what her father did either.

Just then, Hedwig descended from above, landing right next to his goblet of pumpkin juice.

"Hedwig," Harry greeted with a smile as he reached over and ran his fingers down her feathered back. "How are you, girl? I haven't seen you since I sent that letter off to Lisa. Where have you been?"

Hedwig gave a soft hoot, her amber eyes not leaving Harry as she presented him with the letter attached to her leg.

"Harry, is this your owl?" asked Hannah, staring at the snowy owl while Harry took the letter from Hedwig. The pig-tailed girl looked at Hedwig with what could only be construed as awe. Harry would not have been surprised in the least if cartoonish-looking hearts randomly replaced her eyes.

And who knows. With magic, perhaps such a thing was actually possible.

"Yes," Harry answered as he looked over the envelope, and smiled when he saw who the letter was from. Without wasting time, he opened the letter and began reading.

"She's so beautiful," Hannah breathed as she stared at Hedwig. The snowy owl preened under the compliment, puffing out her chest and hooting proudly. Harry would have laughed if he were the sort to let his emotions show more. He knew Hedwig loved getting attention. She was quite possibly the biggest attention-whore he had ever met in his life bar none.

"She is," Harry agreed absently, his eyes skimming the letter, a soft smile working its way onto his face. "Just try not to give her too many compliments or she may get a big head."

Hedwig gave him an angry sounding hoot and tried to nip his finger as a reprimand, but Harry was ready this time and swiftly moved his hands away from the angry owl.

"I'm just kidding, Hedwig," Harry told her soothingly as he grabbed some bacon and offered it to her. Hedwig looked at the bacon distrustfully, prompting Harry to say, "everyone knows you're the most beautiful owl here."

Hedwig continued to stare at him for several more seconds, before taking the peace offering. She then nipped his finger gently and allowed him to stroke her feathers.

"Can I pet her too?" asked Hannah.

"That's up to her," Harry said, looking up from his letter to stare at Hedwig with a raised eyebrow. "How about it, Hedwig? Can Hannah pet you?"

Hedwig blinked her large amber eyes. Her head twisted so she could look at Hannah, who had a hopeful expression, then looked back at Harry, eyes staring at him unblinkingly. After another second, she hooted, then bobbed her head up and down.

"Hedwig said sure," Harry informed Hannah, who promptly reached over and began stroking Hedwig's back. "Just be careful not to ruin her feather's. She spends an awful lot of time on them."

Hannah gave Harry an amused look. "Right," she said. "I'm sure she said all that."

Harry shrugged, not really bothered if Hannah didn't believe him. It wasn't like Hedwig had spoken or anything, not in words at least.

And it wasn't like the blond girl had the connection he had to Hedwig, so she couldn't know how they communicated with each other. The truth was, even Harry wasn't 100 percent sure how he could understand Hedwig so well, though he did have a working theory. Legillemency, or at least, an animal variation of it. Whenever Hedwig 'spoke' to him, she did so by presenting images into his head to convey thoughts and feelings. That was how he understood her.

Of course, this did present an interesting number of questions. Namely, why was he able to understand her when none of the other owls he had seen so far seemed to display any kind of magical aptitude? What was it that made Hedwig special? Or did her ability to telepathically communicate via images have something to do with his own aptitude for mind magic? Perhaps, rather than her being the one to present images in his head, he was simply pulling them out of hers. He supposed it was just one of those great mysteries he would need to discover for himself.

"So who's the letter from?" asked Neville. He blushed when he realized what he asked could be considered invasive. The round-faced boy had already learned that Harry was an innately private person. He was never rude, but when someone asked Harry something that he didn't want to answer, he would smoothly redirect the topic of their conversation away from him. Most of those around them didn't seem to notice, but Neville had, and he was sure Susan had too. With this in mind, he hastened to add, "that is, if you don't mind me asking."

"Not at all," said Harry, smiling as he set the letter down. He was in a good mood now. The letter had gone a long way to easing his mind. "The letter was from my friend, Lisa. I sent one to her our first night here. I wasn't expecting to hear back so soon."

"Wait," Hannah said suddenly. "Isn't Lisa that muggle friend you were talking about on the Hogwarts Express?"

"Yes." Harry gave her a nod. "She is. I wanted to keep in touch with her, so I found out how the wizarding world sends letters to the muggle world without breaking the statute of secrecy."

"That's really sweet of you." Hannah's comment actually made Harry blush. No one had ever told him he was sweet before. Well, Lisa had, but he had long since been desensitized to anything she said. Harry wasn't sure whether to be embarrassed or flattered. "You're a really good friend."

"I guess."

Harry shifted a bit as he regain control of the blood flow to his cheeks. He did his best to finish eating before Hannah could make anymore

comments about him and how sweet he was.

Once he finished eating, he looked over at the others to see if they were done as well.

"So... to the library then?"

Susan and Neville agreed, while Hannah merely sighed and slumped her shoulders. "I guess."

The group of four stood up and walked out of the Great Hall. Because none of them had brought their books or school supplies, they separated and went to their respective dorms to get their supplies, before meeting up again and making their way to the library.

The library was one of the few places Harry had been dying to see since coming to Hogwarts. The library was very large, nearly twice as large as the one in Surrey. The dozens upon dozens of shelves filled to the brim with large tomes nearly had Harry drooling. The mere thought about all the knowledge contained within those books was almost enough to make him lose his composure. Only his iron will and determination not to look like a raging bookworm having book withdrawals kept him from running up to the nearest shelf and grabbing the first book he could get his hands on.

"Well," Harry started, his body tingling with the desire to snatch a book and start reading. "Why don't we find some place to sit. The sooner we can finish our homework, the sooner we can go exploring."

Near the back of the library Harry, Hannah, Susan and Neville came upon a small area for people to read and work. Several tables were evenly spaced around this section of the library in a neat and orderly fashion.

It seemed they weren't the only ones who had gotten the idea to complete their homework at the first opportunity. A number of students were already sitting at the tables, writing down on sheets of parchment or reading from some of the ancient tomes. Most of them were from Ravenclaw, Harry noted.

Most were older students that Harry didn't know the names of, but recognized by face. However, sitting at a table near the back, he saw two first years working diligently on their homework: Terry Boot and Lisa Turpin.

Terry was a skinny boy with short cut brown hair, pale skin and steel gray eyes. He wasn't very tall, but neither was he short. Standing head and shoulders shorter than Harry, he was about average in height. Nor did he look very athletic, judging from what Harry could see of his thin wrists.

Sitting across from him, Lisa Turpin's long, raven-colored hair framed a face with thin pink lips, a button nose and dark brown eyes. She stood several inches shorter than Harry, though it was hard to tell with her sitting. Her fair skin indicated her as someone who stayed indoors most of the time.

Deciding that this was the perfect opportunity to make two more allies outside of his house, Harry led his group over to the pair.

"Excuse me," he said in a polite voice. When Lisa and Terry looked up, their eyes widening upon seeing who was speaking to them, Harry offered a charming smile and affably inquired, "do you mind if we sit with you two?"

Terry and Lisa both blinked, then looked around at the several empty tables near them. They were probably wondering why Harry wanted to sit with them when there was plenty of space available. At least, that's what Harry assumed they were wondering. They appeared confused, but it could have been from something else, though he doubted it.

Whatever they were thinking, the pair eventually decided that having Harry Potter and his friends sit with them was perfectly acceptable.

"Sure," Lisa said, waving her hand towards the empty seats at their table. "Make yourselves comfortable."

Harry grinned and sat down. Behind him Hannah, Neville and Susan looked at each other, before following suit. When they were all settled, Harry decided that introductions were in order.

"It's nice to meet you two. My name's Harry Potter, and with me are my friends Neville Longbottom, Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott." Neville, Hannah, and Susan gave their own greetings as Harry introduced them.

"It's nice to meet you too," Lisa said with a smile. Terry gave them a nod, but still seemed too surprised that Harry Potter wanted to sit with them to say anything. "I'm kind of surprised to see you guys here. I thought we Ravensclaws were the only ones who would be coming up here to get our homework done the first chance we got."

Harry carefully masked the frown he wanted to show. There was that house stereotyping again. If he weren't so intent on gaining allies in other houses and people like Susan and Hannah, he would have wondered if there was some kind of loyalty charm to ensure that people only got along with those in the house they were sorted into.

"I find that it's best to get homework out of the way before doing anything else," Harry replied. "That way we don't have to worry about it for the rest of the week, and can use that time to relax and have fun."

"I never thought of it like that," Terry said, looking thoughtful. "But I guess it makes sense."

Susan looked over at Hannah with an expression that could almost be considered smug. The blond girl threw her hands up in exasperation. "Alright, alright, I get it. Work first, play later. Sheesh, perhaps you should have been in Ravenclaw."

"Actually," Harry corrected Hannah with a small smile. "Hufflepuff is the House of hard work. So if anything, you should be more than happy to do your homework first and to the best of your abilities." Hannah just pouted at him, prompting a few mild chuckles from the others.

"Speaking of homework," Neville added as he looked at the blank parchment that he would be using to write his potions essay. "We should probably get started on ours."

"Right."

Harry's three friends quickly settled down and began to work. Susan

dipped her quill into her ink jar and began dutifully writing on her parchment, using the book in front of her as a reference. Hannah looked at her own sheet, chewing on the tip of her quill and appearing lost on how best to get started. Surprisingly enough, Neville seemed to be doing decently and had already started writing.

Terry and Lisa proved their position as Ravenclaws quite well by burying themselves in their books and parchment the moment introductions were over. Harry wondered if this was just how they were, or if perhaps their personalities were already becoming subsumed by what was expected of them as Ravenclaws. He thought it far too early for them to have completely conformed to their house standards, but couldn't say for sure. For all he knew, they could just want to get their homework out of the way as expediently as possible.

Soon the sound of quills scribbling on parchment filled the table as everyone started working. Harry watched the others for a moment before getting out a book of his own, though it was not any of the school books, but instead the one Professor McGonagall had given him.

He started to read, allowing himself to get lost within the knowledge contained in the pages. Out of his peripheral, he saw Lisa and Terry occasionally looking up from their work to give him inquiring glances. He offered them his best friendly smile when they did, which caused Terry to look down at his work and Lisa to blush as she followed her fellow Ravenclaw's example. They both seemed curious about him, but were unsure of how to speak to him.

Hannah on the other hand, had no trouble talking. The girl seemed to be having trouble with her assignment and, after nibbling on her quill, looked up to see Harry not only not doing any homework, but also reading a book she didn't recognize. Naturally, she was curious.

"Wasn't the whole point of coming up here to finish our homework?" she asked, looking torn between pouting and glaring. "Why aren't you doing your homework?"

"I'm already done." Harry smiled and flipped another page in his book. His words caused everyone else to look at him in surprise. Lisa and Terry

seemed especially surprised that someone had already finished their homework. "That's part of the reason I wanted you guys to finish your work as well, that way none of us have to worry about it, and we can spend the rest of the weekend exploring the castle."

Hannah's mouth formed into a tiny 'o' of surprise and her eyes widened a bit. The others didn't look much better. Lisa and Terry both gaped at him; Susan also stared at him in surprise, and perhaps even a bit of admiration; Neville, on the other hand, furrowed his brow in thought.

"When did you have time to finish your homework?" he asked curiously, eyes squinting as he strained to see if he could remember seeing Harry ever do his homework before.

"This morning," Harry answered. "Before you and the others woke up."

"Oh..." Neville blinked, then just seemed to accept his eccentric friends words. "Well, you do wake up pretty early. You're always gone whenever I wake up."

"I've always been an early riser," Harry said in agreement. "I suppose I just have more energy than most, and I don't like lazing around when I can use that time to do something productive."

"If you're finished with your homework, do you think you can help me with mine?" asked Hannah, looking at him with wide, hopeful eyes.

Harry carefully closed his book and set it on the table.

"I don't see why not," he said, standing up and walking over to Hannah. He stopped beside her and leaned down a bit to see what she had written. It was currently blank, though the potions book sitting next to her let him know what she was working. Still, for the sake of starting the girl along, he asked, "so what are you working on?"

"Potions," Hannah said. "Professor Snape wants us to write a one-foot paper on the Boil Cure Potion."

"He gave us that assignment as well," Harry said, hunkering down and beginning to help her by explaining the best way to write an essay. He

didn't tell her anything about the potion itself, as that not only wouldn't help her, but may be considered cheating if she wrote down what he said verbatim. He wouldn't put it past Snape to spot something like that and dock points for cheating. Instead, he told her how best to organize her essay and allowed her to write down the information in her own words.

The others snuck glances at the two as Harry helped Hannah.

"This is actually pretty easy," Hannah said, sounding surprised after finishing her essay nearly half an hour later.

"Writing an essay is actually a lot easier than people think," Harry told her as he checked her essay for grammar mistakes. "The problem most people get stuck on is usually the beginning. They waste too much time trying to figure out how they should start their essay, which means they have less time to write it."

"Uh huh," Hannah said, nodding at him like she understood everything he said when she really didn't. "So... what do you think?"

"It's good," Harry said after his eyes skimmed it over. He handed the essay back to her and gave a congratulatory smile. "I can't see Snape giving you anything less than an O on it, though knowing him, he might end up giving you an A."

"He is kind of unpleasant," Lisa spoke up, looking away from her work to eye the pair. "Terry and I shared that class with Hufflepuff and he was really rude. He kept insulting everyone for not being up to his standards, and he never answered any of the questions we had about the potion he wanted us to make. I'm surprised he's even allowed to teach here."

"If you think he was bad in your class, you should have seen him in our class," Neville quipped. He looked almost done with his Potions essay, Harry noted with a bit of a smile. He wondered if having been partnered with him helped the boy some, or if perhaps he just had a natural talent for potions. "He wasn't just mean, but seemed to have it out for Harry."

"Really?" Susan asked with a small frown as the others perked up. Terry only looked slightly interested, while Lisa and Hannah both leaned in, as if Neville's words were a piece juicy gossip about a famous actor or

actress cheating on their spouse. It just proved to Harry that most women, regardless of age, were into gossip. Lisa Crawft was the same way.

"Yeah," Neville said in a hushed tone. He looked around for a second, almost like he was afraid Snape appeared out of thin air and give him detention, then leaned in. "When he got to Harry's name when taking roll, he was all like 'Ah, Mr. Potter. Our new celebrity.' and then he started asking these really hard questions that apparently weren't on the first year syllabus, and then he took points from Gryffindor, claiming that Harry was cheating because a first year shouldn't know the answer to those questions."

"You're joking," Terry exclaimed in shock. Hannah and Lisa gasped. Susan held her left hand to her mouth, her wide eyes speaking volumes about her thoughts on the matter.

"He's not," Harry answered for Neville.

"What kind of teacher would do such a thing?"

"The kind who holds a grudge against a dead man," Harry muttered darkly.

"What was that, Harry?"

"Nothing," Harry said, shaking his head. He wasn't willing to get others involved in his fight against Snape. "Anyway, Snape's just biased. From what I hear, he hates every house except his own, and has a particular hatred for students in Gryffindor. Some of the older students I spoke with said he's always taking points for doing things like breathing incorrectly, and giving points to Slytherin for doing something like 'setting out their supplies correctly.'"

Of course, considering it was Fred and George who told him this, he wasn't quite sure whether to believe it or not. Though his encounter with the potions professor did lend evidence to support them.

"It makes you wonder why Professor Dumbledore allows him to work here," Terry commented.

"I'm sure the headmaster has his reasons," Harry spoke with a shrug. Though just what those reasons were, he didn't know. Deciding to change the subject, he said, "would any of you also like help on your homework as well?"

"I would," Lisa, Neville, Terry and Susan all said at the same time. Lisa and Terry looked at each other, while Susan and Neville promptly flushed.

"Why don't I just walk around and see what you guys need help with, hmm?" Harry said with a smile. Things were looking up. He now had allies in three of the four houses, which meant he only had one house left to go.

Of course, Slytherin would be the hardest house to get an ally in because he was a Gryffindor. But then, that was just another reason he had decided to go into the House of Lions. It would create a much larger impact on his peers than if he had gone into Ravenclaw.

After all, if a Gryffindor could befriend a Slytherin, then so could anyone else.

XoX

The rest of Harry's time in the library was spent helping the others finish their homework. He helped Lisa with Potions and Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Terry with History of Magic. Susan also needed some help on her Charms homework, but only in getting the ending of her essay right. Neville had some trouble with Transfiguration, which seemed to be his weakest subject. Thankfully, he had been able to get the Potion assignment done easily enough. The amount of time they had spent in the library was close to two hours. Harry was a little disappointed that he had not been able to read his book, but figured he could read later that night.

By the time they had finished their homework it was nearly time for lunch, and the group that now consisted of six made their way to the Great Hall. Once again on Harry's suggestion, they all sat at the same table, the Ravenclaw table this time. This decision brought a large number of stares from everyone, but considering Harry was already known for doing things most would consider abnormal, the gawking they received didn't last

long.

During their time eating lunch, Harry did his best to keep conversation flowing so he could learn as much about Terry and Lisa as possible, and also so the other three wouldn't be left out. He learned quite a bit about the pair of Ravenclaws, and felt he was well on his way to earning their friendship.

Lisa and Terry were pureblood's from minor Houses. Neither family owned a seat on the Wizengamot. Lisa's mother worked as a Nurse at Saint Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies, and her father was a small time businessman who worked for a company that imported magical items. Terry's parents were both authors who had written several fictional novels and a few thesis papers on magical theory. Neither were very well known, but they made enough money to live comfortably.

He also learned a bit about the two as people. Much like himself, Lisa was a history buff. The only difference between the two was that where Harry knew everything there was to know about the history of the non-magical world, Lisa knew everything about the wizarding one. Or at least, she knew enough to make Harry feel incompetent, something that did not happen very often.

That did bother him a bit due to his competitive nature, but seeing as Lisa grew up in the magical world, had to concede that she would know more about its history than he did. He was actually kind of glad that she was so into history, even if it meant she knew more than him, because it gave them something to bond over.

Terry was not much for history, but he did enjoy reading magical theory and fiction. It probably had something to do with his parents influence, but the male Ravenclaw was a big fan of stories like *Enchanted Encounters* and *David Copperfield*.

On that note, Harry found it very interesting when he learned that Jane Austin and Charles Dickens were actually squibs.

Their time after lunch was spent exploring the castle's halls and rooms. All in all, Harry the time spent with his friends to be fascinating and enjoyable, though a part of him still wished he could read his animagus

book.

XoX

The very first thing Harry did upon entering the room they would learn Defense Against the Dark Arts in was to crinkle his nose. The room held a heavy stench of garlic, as if someone had mashed garlic into a paste and smeared it across the walls, floor, ceiling and tables, then sprayed the air with garlic scented Lysol for good measure.

With his nose wrinkled in disgust—he wasn't the only one—and promising himself to find out if there was a charm to freshen the air around him, Harry walked further into the class room.

The room itself was pretty standard; it had several desks and tables, a large set of windows that gave a view of the grounds outside. An iron chandelier hung from the ceiling, as well as a dragon skeleton. At one end of the classroom was an old projector of some kind, and at the front of the class was a large desk with a staircase behind it leading to what Harry suspected was the professor's private quarters.

"W-welcome to D-D-Defense Against the Dark Arts," the teacher, a man named Quirinus Quirrel stuttered out as he surveyed the students. He appeared young, mid-twenties maybe, with pale skin, light blue eyes, and what looked like a really bad case of eye-twitching. Harry noticed the paranoid tick right off the bat and couldn't help but wonder what this man had done to contract such a reaction. The eye would twitch at random, irregular intervals every few seconds. He also wore a large purple turban on his head, and Harry wondered if he was hiding some kind of disfigurement. "M-my n-name is... Quirinus Quirrel, and I w-w-will be your t-t-teacher for your time a-a-at Ho-Hogwarts."

Harry frowned as he listened to the man's stuttering. Was this fool really the person who was going to teach them how to deal with the Dark Arts? He looked like the kind of person who was afraid of his own shadow! How could someone who looked so easily frightened possibly teach them how to defend themselves from the Dark Arts?

"N-now," Quirrel continued after stumbling through his speech. "P-please turn to page s-s-sixteen in your books."

It wasn't long after the lesson started that Harry determined this class would be a complete waste of time. The man before them wasn't a very good teacher, and Harry could glean bits of knowledge from the professor's incessant stuttering. The fact that Professor Quirrel seemed to be paraphrasing the book without even adding any personal anecdotes merely added to Harry's conclusion: he would be better off doing self-study in this class.

So while people like Hermione Granger dutifully took notes on, Harry used his parchment and calligraphy pen to get started on the homework he knew would be due next week thanks to Lisa and Terry having already had this class.

It was during this time, after nearly finishing his homework, that Harry felt a sharp pain entering his scar, along with the unmistakable feeling of someone using legillemency to try and poke around in his head.

Looking up, Harry frowned and tried to find out who was using legillemency on him. His first thought was the teacher, but when he looked at Professor Quirrel, the man's back was turned to the students and he was writing on the chalkboard, which immediately scratched him off the suspect list.

Harry knew very little about legillemency, but did know that eye-contact was required to initiate a mind probe. At least, the more passive form was. It could also be done with a wand, but that was only for the more aggressive form of invading the mind and only something a master Legillemens could do.

Taking a discreet glance around the room, Harry's frown deepened when he saw no one who could have possibly used legillemency on him. Not only were none of the students even looking at him, busy as they were writing notes—or at least pretending to—he couldn't see anyone hiding inside of the classroom either.

Then again, that meant very little. With magic it may be possible for someone to hide in the classroom using some kind of spell to remain invisible. That wasn't a pleasant thought, and Harry decided to research on how someone could become invisible, as well as spells to counter it. It

would not only prove useful in finding out if there was anyone hiding in the room, but also help him with something else he was planning to do later in the year.

"You okay, Harry?" asked Neville in a quiet whisper.

"Just fine," Harry said just as quietly. He looked over at Professor Quirrel, who had just asked the class what they could tell him about the wand-lighting charm.

Naturally, Hermione Granger's hand was the first one in the air.

"Y-y-yes, Ms. Granger?"

"The wand-lighting charm, or *Lumos*, is a light-creation spell used to illuminate the tip of the caster's wand, and creates a very warm light. It was created in the eighteenth century by Levina Monkstanley. It is also used to repel certain spectral creatures such as Gytrashes and malevolent spirits." Hermione's answer was concluded with her sending Harry a smug look, as if being the first to answer the question somehow made her a better student than him. Harry just sighed as he realized the girl really was jealous about how easy he made their previous classes look, and was apparently looking for a way to even the score.

Granted, he could be just as competitive as her, but even then he usually tried to let his grades do the talking.

"V-v-very good," Quirrel stuttered out. "T-take f-f-five points for Gryffindor."

The rest of the class was spent casting the Lumos spell, which was actually the simplest of all the spells they would learn this year. Everyone in the class managed to get it on their first try.

After class was over, Harry told Neville to head back to the Gryffindor Common Room without him. The round-faced boy only looked at him for a second before agreeing and heading off with the rest of the Gryffindors.

Harry then followed the Slytherins or, to be more specific, he followed the three snakes he had met before the sorting. Gryffindor only shared

Potions and DADA with the Slytherin's, and with how much Snape seemed to hate him, this was his only chance to speak with the trio.

Blaise, Daphne and Tracey were in the back of the group. The dark-skinned boy walked a little ahead of the other two, and all three were far enough away from the other Slytherins that he doubted the others would pay them any mind. It let him know a lot about their position within their house.

"Blaise, Daphne, Tracey," Harry called out as he caught up with the trio. The three stopped and turned around. While Blaise only expressed mild surprise at seeing Harry coming up to them, Daphne gave him a look that could probably freeze hell. It made him wonder if he had done something to offend her. At least Tracey didn't react with such hostility.

"Harry!" Tracey said in surprise. "Why are you here?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I thought that would be obvious. I wanted to speak with you."

"Oh." Tracey had the decency to look embarrassed. She perked up a moment later and sent him a mild pout. "I figured that. What I meant was, why are you talking to us?"

"What do you mean why?" Harry asked, adopting a confused expression. "Why wouldn't I want to talk to you?"

Tracey flushed a bit. "Well, you know, we're Slytherin and you're, well, you're a Gryffindor. It's common knowledge that Gryffindors and Slytherins don't get a long."

"And who told you that?"

"What do you mean who told me that?" Tracey frowned. "Everyone says that. It's common knowledge! Snakes and Lions don't get along. They just don't."

"That's just stupid, Tracey," Harry said chidingly. While Tracey's right eye actually twitched in annoyance, Blaise hid a snicker behind a cough, and Daphne's glare seemed to gain another level of iciness, for reasons he

couldn't fathom. "There is nothing that says Gryffindors and Slytherins can't get along. People who say that are foolish and ignorant, believing that because Salazar and Godric had some kind of argument so long ago it's probably been taken completely out of context by now, that all Slytherins and Gryffindors are bound to be mortal enemies. Why should we care what happened long before our many times great-grandparents were even a twinkle in their many times great-grandparent's eyes?"

Tracey stood there, blinking at Harry as if he had grown a second head. Meanwhile, Daphne had furrowed her brows and Blaise looked thoughtful.

"You do make a good point," the dark-skinned boy said, rubbing his chin. Out of the corner of her eye, Daphne glanced at the Italian boy with a small frown. "I mean, it has been a long time since the Founders were alive..."

"Exactly," said Harry, "their rivalry was a long time ago, and just because they had some kind of argument that ended their friendship doesn't mean we can't be friends, right?"

"Well..." Tracey shifted a bit, worrying her lower lip as she pondered Harry's words. He could tell she actually did want to be friends, unlike Daphne, who looked like she wanted nothing to do with him. "I guess that's true..."

"Of course it is," Harry said with his most charming smile. It seemed to have the desired effect because after a few moments, Tracey was smiling as well. And while Blaise was not necessarily giving a bright smile like the brunette, he at least had a smirk. Daphne was not smiling, unfortunately. "Which means we're still friends, right?"

"Right!" Tracey said with a nod. Harry grinned, then looked over at Blaise with a raised eyebrow.

"Sure," Blaise said, shrugging nonchalantly. "It 'll be interesting to be friends with a Gryffindor."

"Don't think for one second that we're going to be friends, Potter," Daphne informed him in a cold voice the moment Harry looked at her.

"Daphne!" Tracey admonished her friend, though she looked somewhat resigned. Daphne just gave the other girl a surprisingly cold look before turning on her heel and walking away.

"So... what's the deal with her?" asked Harry. He was seriously beginning to wonder if he had committed some great sin against the blond pureblood. For all he knew her issues regarding him could have been caused by something his great-grandfather had done against her family. Grudges amongst purebloods were notorious for lasting decades, sometimes even centuries, or so Andromeda had informed him when mentioning how the Potters and Blacks had been bitter enemies before Sirius and his father became friends at Hogwarts. And even then, Sirius had betrayed his father in the end so that wasn't much to go on.

"Don't mind her," Tracey reassured him. "It's not you she hates. Daphne acts like that around everyone she's not friends with. It's just... how she is."

"I understand," Harry said, resisting the urge to sigh. It looked like befriending the Slytherins, or at least one particular Slytherin, would take a lot more effort than he had assumed.

Well, if he were honest with himself, he had thought it would take a bit more effort to befriend all three of them. At least with Tracey and Blaise on board, he would have the chance to speak with Daphne some more. Maybe he would be able to thaw the girl out in time?

Then again, maybe not. It was hard to say for sure. Wouldn't stop him from trying though.

"Well," Harry started in an attempt to relieve the somewhat awkward tension Daphne's cold attitude had brought. He shifted his stance, putting most of his weight on his left foot. "I wanted to inform you guys that I'm creating a study group. We meet every Saturday for breakfast before heading to the library to do our homework. You two and Daphne are welcome to join us. I really hope to see you guys there."

Tracey and Blaise looked at each. The male of the duo shrugged his shoulders and Tracey turned to Harry with a bright smile. "We'll be there, and I'll make sure Daphne comes too."

"Great," Harry said with a relieved smile. While Daphne presented a bit of a problem, at least Blaise and Tracey had hopped on board easily enough. "I'll see you guys then."

"Right, bye Harry!" Tracey offered him a parting smile while Blaise gave him a silent nod. The two soon walked off, Harry watching as they moved out of sight. before he turned around and heading to the Gryffindor common room.

While he walked through the hallways, Harry let his mind wander to his plans. His first plan to gain allies in each of the four houses was coming along nicely. Daphne posed a problem, but he felt that with some time and effort, she would become his ally eventually.

It was a good thing he had come to them only a few days after school started. He figured at least part of the reason they were so willing to join him was because they hadn't been given enough time to conform to the ideals of their house. Granted, he didn't think hating everyone in Gryffindor simply because they were in Gryffindor was an original ideal for the house of snakes, but something that had simply developed from long years of intense rivalry. However, the fact remained that most everyone—except for him it seemed—was of the belief that Gryffindors and Slytherins couldn't be anything but intense rivals at best, and bitter enemies at worst.

He hoped to eventually dissuade people of that belief. One of his goals while studying at Hogwarts was to gain the respect of *everyone*, not just the teachers and those in his house, but the respect of every single student of every single house. If he wanted to make inroads in this particular goal, he needed to have allies in each house. Slytherin would be the hardest to earn respect from because he was in Gryffindor.

That was fine with him. He looked forward to the challenge.

This is the last chapter I've written so far for this story. I'm currently working on chapter 14, but it doesn't seem to want to come out. It may be a while before I post the next chapter because of that.

And on that note, I will leave you guys here. Be sure to let me know

what you think. Any area you guys feel I can improve is always welcome.

Later!

Flying

Flying

Three months had passed since I spoke with Master Wei. Three months since I realized that I was becoming the very thing I'd grown up despising. Master Wei had helped me understand why I became the way I did.

I was afraid. Fear begets anger. Anger begets hate. And hate often leads to violence. My fear of the Dursley's caused me to hate them so much that when I learned to use my powers, I became drunk off them.

As I walked through the halls of school, I thought about how much had changed. I no longer abused my relatives, though I did protect myself if they tried hurting me. I was determined not to let myself fall onto the dark path again.

"Give me that back! Give it back! My mum made that for me!"

I stopped walking as I turned a corner to see my cousin and his friends picking on a girl. Her brown hair flying around her face as she leapt through the air, trying to grab the lunchbox Dudley and his gang tossed above her head.

"Aw, did you hear that." Dudley's laugh sounded like pig squeals. "Her mum made it for her."

His friends laugh with him.

"Think we should give me it back?"

"Naw!"

As they continued teasing the girl my frown increased. What should I do? I wondered. I didn't want to get violent, despite how annoyed I was, but should I just let them pick on this girl? The answer came to me when I

saw tears gathering in the girl's eyes.

No, I couldn't.

XoX

"I'll probably end up falling off my broom and breaking something," Neville moaned miserably as he and Harry walked into the Great Hall for breakfast. The young, round-faced boy had been like this ever since the morning began, when they had first noticed the post on the bulletin board claiming they would have flying lessons after Herbology. Apparently, he was not looking forward to their flying lessons.

Not that Harry could blame him. The boy's lack of confidence and general clumsiness definitely made the idea of putting him on a broom seem like a bad one. It didn't help that Neville's grandmother never let her grandson even make an attempt at learning to fly for fear that he would kill himself.

Again, this was understandable. Neville was clumsy enough on land, Harry could only imagine how bad he would be in the air.

Of course, he was sure that most of the boys clumsiness coincided with his lack of confidence. People who had no self-confidence tended to be more clumsy than those who did. Still, it would not do for Neville to begin putting himself down after all of the progress he had made thus far.

"Have you ever heard of a self-fulfilling prophecy, Neville?" asked Harry, his voice just as mild as always, his tone laced with minor curiosity. Neville stared at him.

"What?"

"A Self-fulfilling prophecy," Harry repeated, sitting down at the Gryffindor table. Neville sat down beside him and they began piling food onto their plates. "It is the act of creating a prediction that comes true simply due to the fact that the prediction was made in the first place. For example; if you tell yourself that you are going to injure yourself during our flying lessons, you will, simply because you are so sure that this event will happen that your mind and body responds accordingly to make it so. By telling yourself that you will do horribly in something, you are already

making it happen. Belief is half the battle when it comes to accomplishing anything. Particularly, belief in oneself. If you do not believe you can do something, you won't be able to do it because your mind is so set on believing you cannot accomplish your task that it works against you."

Harry paused, watching Neville looking at him with the same gaze he always did when Harry gave him advice of this nature. Letting Neville take a moment to think about his words, Harry let his eyes take a quick scan of the Great Hall to see if any of their other friends had arrived.

A little ways away from them, Seamus was telling Dean Thomas about how he had spent almost all of his childhood flying around the countryside on his broom. Idle boasting. Harry knew for a fact the boy was lying by looking at his tells. Whenever Seamus lied, he made grand gestures with his hands as if conducting an orchestra. Little things like that let Harry know who was a braggart and who was being honest.

And Seamus wasn't the only one boasting. Over at the Slytherin table Draco Malfoy was telling anyone who would listen about how he had been chased by muggle helicopters. Quite frankly, Harry was surprised the boy even knew what a helicopter was.

While many students from Slytherin and Gryffindor bragged about how exceptional they were on their brooms, just as many looked nervous.

Hermione Jean Granger was one of those people. He could see the girl a little ways away from him, sitting next to Lavender Brown, Parvati Patil and Fay Dunbar. The bushy-haired witch was currently talking the ears off of the other girls about what she had read in the book, *Quidditch Through the Ages* about flying. None of the girls seemed to be paying attention to her. If anything, the three witches seemed more than a little irate listening to the girl's constant chatter.

Harry almost shook his head. This was one lesson you couldn't learn from a book. Learning to fly on a broom could only be done through the physical act of practicing with an instructor, something Hermione did not seem to understand. It was very much like his martial arts. Just because someone read a book on Chinese Kenpo, Jiu Jitsu or any other form of hand to hand combat, didn't mean you would become a master without

practice.

The second of observation soon passed. Harry turned back to Neville, who was wearing an attentive expression. "Consequently, if you tell yourself that you are going to do well, that you are going to get on that broom and be one of the best fliers in our year, it will become so because you believe it to be so."

"Granted, you may not actually become the best flier in our year simply through belief. Flying is an acquired skill that few gain through natural talent. But at the very least, you can be assured that by believing in yourself, you won't do anything that will potentially injure and humiliate you."

"So you think if I just act more... confident," Neville began unsurely. "Then I will do better during our flying lessons."

"Certainly," Harry said with a nod. "Confidence begets surety of movement and action. When you are confident, you act with less hesitation, less fear, and only when you are lacking in the necessary information to make informed decisions will you ever make a mistake." He tilted his head, then added, "well, a mistake that could be embarrassing or harmful at least."

"There is also skill to consider," Harry started again after a few seconds. "I understand that some people just don't have a natural aptitude for certain activities. You may not have a natural propensity for flying." Seeing Neville begin to look worried again, Harry quickly added, "but even if you're not capable of pulling off any of the tricks and aerial stunts of a professional flier, the basics should be fairly simple to accomplish."

Those words seemed to set the boy at ease. Neville nodded, more to himself than to Harry, and began eating slowly, digesting the information Harry imparted to him.

While his fellow Gryffindor contemplated his words, Hannah and Susan entered in the Great Hall and walked over to them.

"Hi Harry! Neville!" Hannah greeted with a cheery smile as she and Susan sat down. Neville looked up from where he had been drilling a

hole into the table, and Harry offered the two witches a smile of his own.

"Morning you two," Harry said, leaning forward a bit as he looked at them curiously. "I heard you and the Ravenclaws had flying lessons yesterday." Neville perked up and looked at the pair more interestedly. "How was it?"

"It was great!" Hannah answered his question with great enthusiasm as she began eating. "I was really nervous at first, and Madam Hooch was kind of a kill-joy, but once we got on our brooms it was pretty fun."

"Terry was a lot of help," Susan added to the conversation. "He helped correct the way we were holding the brooms and showed us how to properly sit on them."

As if being summoned by words alone, Terry appeared for breakfast with a few of the other Ravenclaws, including Lisa Turpin. The brown-haired young man and the raven-haired witch broke off from their Housemates and made their way to the Gryffindor table where both sat down.

"Hello, Harry," Lisa greeted, smiling at him. Harry returned it. Out of all the people he had met so far, she was the one he got along with the most, mainly because of their shared love of history. When they had been exploring the castle during the weekend, he and Lisa had shared historical facts and debated the merits between muggle and magical histories. It had been a fascinating discussion.

"Salutations," Harry said.

"Morning," Terry added in a slightly gruff voice.

"Rough night?" asked Hannah, noticing the slight bags under Terry's eyes.

"We had Astronomy last night," Lisa answered for the tired looking boy. "And according to Kevin, Terry stayed up all night trying to finish our homework for the class."

At this, Terry's face, still looking slightly haggard, took on a light pink tint, his embarrassment obvious to those who looked.

Harry chuckled. "I suppose I can understand, though considering Astronomy lasts until one o'clock, that might not have been the wisest move."

Terry grimaced a bit, the blush on his face becoming more prominent. "Don't remind me."

"So Hannah was telling us that you know how to handle a broom," Neville said, bringing a change in topic. Harry. He was probably seeking the other boy's advice. Terry seemed grateful for the subject change.

"I've flown on occasion," Terry admitted. "When I was nine, my dad bought me a cleansweep and taught me how to fly. Mum wasn't too pleased with him, but decided I could learn so long as we were safe and flew where muggles couldn't see us."

"Do you have any tips?"

Terry proceeded to speak with Neville about flying, offering what tips and information he could. Neville hung on his every word, listening with a rapt attention that he usually reserved for when Harry gave out his own brand of wisdom. He looked like he wished he had a piece of parchment and a quill so he could take notes.

While the conversation on flying went on between the two, Harry started his own conversation with the others. For most of that time, Hannah seemed to dictate the conversation, speaking about anything and everything that took her fancy. This was not very surprising as she was the most talkative of the three girls. Despite this, Harry made sure to allow Susan and Lisa to get a word in edgewise by directing questions and statements towards them. He didn't want Hannah hogging all the conversation to herself.

It was nearing the end of breakfast when a barn owl bearing a package flew into the Great Hall and landed in front of Neville. It stretched out its leg and Neville took the package, opening it up eagerly while the others looked on.

Inside was a glass ball large enough to fit in the palm of one's hand. The white smokey substance inside of it was constantly in motion, roiling

around like a storm cloud. It vaguely reminded Harry of those crystal balls he saw at fortune teller stalls at certain theme parks.

"A remembrall?" Harry raised an eyebrow in curiosity. He knew what they were, having seen them in a 'novelty' shop at Diagon Alley. Remembralls were items that were used to help someone remember something they had forgotten. To activate that particular feature, the remembrall is held in the palm of the hand, and if someone has forgotten something it turns red. Harry thought the whole thing was a bit of a waste. After all, it may inform you that you have forgotten something, but it never tells you what it is you have forgotten. "I take it that's from your gran?"

"Yeah, gran knows how forgetful I can be and bought me this to help," Neville said. "When the remembrall is held like this it will turn red if you've forgotten... some... thing?" As Neville trailed off everyone else looked at the remembrall as it turned a bright red. "Oh..."

"Looks like you've forgotten something," Harry said, frowning, wondering what the boy had forgotten this time. Last time he had forgotten where Trevor was. It would be something similar, Harry was sure. That toad always seemed to be skipping off to somewhere.

"Did Trevor disappear again, Neville?" Susan asked in a not unkindly way, her eyes showing compassion for the forgetful boy.

"I don't think so..."

As Neville scrunched his eyes in thought, trying to remember what he had forgotten, Malfoy came up behind him and snatched the glass orb out of the boy's hand.

Harry turned his head to look at the boy. Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind the blond trying to look menacing and doing a poor job in his opinion. Malfoy was looking at the remembrall with something akin to mocking amusement.

"What's this? A remembrall?" he sneered at Neville who quailed under the look. "You really are pathetic, aren't you? Needing something like this to help you remember where you left that disgusting toad of yours. But then, I guess a squib like you needs all the help he can get."

Harry's frown deepened. This was only the second time he had the displeasure of meeting Draco Malfoy up close. More and more the boy reminded him of his cousin, Dudley Dursley, and that was never a good thing.

Neville shrank in upon himself. The other boy's words were like steel barbs, painful and damaging.

"Why don't you go back to your den of snakes, Malfoy!" Hannah spoke with more than just a little vitriol. Terry and Lisa scowled at the boy. A hushed silence descended around the Gryffindor table, and many of Neville's housemates glared daggers at the blond. Not that Malfoy seemed to notice. "No one wants you here!"

Malfoy produced his own scowl, though it looked closer to a sneer. "Still don't know how to speak to your betters I see. Filthy little half-blood."

Before things could get ugly, Harry stood up, gathering the attention of those around him and most of the hall, who had grown silent to watch the confrontation. Over by the Professor's table, Professor McGonagall stood up and began making her way toward the confrontation in the hopes of defusing the situation before it got ugly.

"Heir Malfoy," Harry intoned, and the words had Draco instinctively stiffening as he was called by his formal title as the heir to a powerful pureblood family. "You would do well not to insult my friends, especially if you have any hope of gaining my allegiance." Harry had no plan of forming an alliance with the blond boy. He was too arrogant and too set in his way for Harry's taste, but that did not mean he would not use the alliance trump card to make the boy back off.

"You should also know that the families of Potter and Longbottom have been allied with each other since sixteen-fifty-two," Harry continued. "Our families have forged a powerful alliance, and any slight against the heir to the Longbottom name will be seen as a slight against me. Do remember that in the future." He watched as Malfoy's face grew pale everywhere except his cheeks, which turned red with either embarrassment or rage; Harry didn't know. Maybe both. Harry held out his hand. "Now, hand over the remembrall and I will forget this incident ever happened."

Draco looked at Harry's hand, then at the remembrall, then back to Harry's hand. Finally, a sneer appeared on his face as he non to gently set the magical glass orb in Harry's outstretched appendage.

Whirling around, Draco stalked back toward the Slytherin table, Crabbe and Goyle following behind him with matching expressions of confusion. Many stares followed the trio as they passed the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables, most of them showing disapproval of the boy's actions. Malfoy just glared at everyone as he sat down with a heavy thump.

With a soft sigh, Harry placed the remembrall on the table in front of Neville and sat down.

"Thanks, Harry," Neville said quietly.

Harry gave the boy a smile. "You're welcome."

"That was so cool, Harry," Hannah gushed. "The way you're constantly showing up Malfoy whenever he shows his ugly face is enough to make my day."

Harry's eyes shone with amusement.

"Glad to be of service."

"It was pretty impressive," Terry added his own input into the conversation. "The way you handled Malfoy."

Harry shrugged and took a bite of his food, chewing a bit before swallowing.

"Malfoy is actually easy to deal with once you understand how he thinks," Harry began to lecture; it was something he really enjoyed doing—lecturing, that is. "You see, Malfoy is a pureblood, one of those who have been raised to believe he is superior to those with dirty blood, or muggleborns and half-bloods. Status is everything to him, and because of his father's position within the Ministry, he has come to the belief that he is at the top of the food chain."

He noticed that all of his friends were listening with rapt attention, even those he was not as well acquainted with were leaning in to hear what he had to say. Harry smiled. It was good to see that his peers were always so interested in listening to him. This feeling of respect and admiration really was the best.

"But the truth of the matter is no matter how much money his father throws around, there are those more powerful than he. The Malfoy family, for all the money they bribe people with, are not the wealthiest family in Britain. That honor belongs to the remaining families of the Founding Five, the Bones." Harry nodded to Susan who blushed bright red. "The Longbottoms." he gestured to Neville. "The Potters, and the Blacks. Each of these four families have accrued more wealth than the Malfoy's could hope to gain within a hundred years."

"Then how come you guys don't do anything about him?" asked Lisa, frowning. "If you three are richer than Malfoy, then surely you could just out bribe the Ministry out of his hands, right?"

"Right now none of us have control over our finances," Harry told her. "All three of us are minors, and we would need to be an adult or legally emancipated in order to access our vaults. Because of that, none of us have the ability to use our money to our advantage."

"But even if we did have the ability to toss money around like it was going out of style, we wouldn't," Harry continued. "Not only is it morally wrong to use ones *accrued* wealth to get what you want, it's also dangerous politically. You must understand that using wealth to bribe your way to the top will eventually lead to your downfall. What happens when someone who doesn't take bribes ascends to become Minister of Magic? Or if you use all that money you have acquired and keep spending it on bribes, only to realize you've run out of money?"

Harry paused, allowing his friends time to let that sink in.

"Then there is the fact that, before now, the Founding Families have never really needed to use bribery to get what they want." He looked at Lisa. "You know about the Founding Five, don't you?"

"Of course." Lisa looked offended that he would even suggest she didn't

know the history of the five most important families to the Ministry of Magic. "The Founding Five was the name given to the five families that created the Ministry of Magic, and they were the ones who accomplished what the Four Founders started when they built this school: the complete segregation of the magical and non-magical worlds."

"Exactly." Harry nodded. "The Founding Five were the creators of today's Ministry, and they were the ones who gained the first five seats on the Wizengamot. Our word holds a lot of sway over magical Britain's government."

"Of course," Harry added. "We've lost a lot of power since then. The war against Voldemort decimated many pureblood families, including those of the Founding Five."

He ignored the flinches and paling faces his casual mentioning of the Dark Lord's name invoked. They would have to get over their fear eventually, because he had no intention of giving that man anymore power than he already had. Especially since he was dead.

"As of this moment, the Blacks are all but extinct, with the only remaining male heir currently incarcerated in Azkaban prison. Only Susan and her Aunt remain of the Bones family after the war, and Amelia Bones is the head of the Department of Magical law enforcement, so the Bones family seat is currently in stasis until Susan reaches the age of majority. Neville's family managed to survive, I know that he has a couple of aunts, uncles and cousins who had not been in the country during the war, but the main branch only consists of him and his Grandmother, who currently holds the Longbottom seat. And you all know that I am the last of the Potter family."

"That's pretty sad." Hannah looked downtrodden at the turn this conversation took. "To think that so many important families were killed off like that."

"That's war," Harry informed her with a shrug. "In war, people die. And if you think that's bad, you should read up on some of the muggle wars that have taken place. The non-magical community is possibly even more apt at finding new ways to kill each other than we wizards are."

XoX

Potions class that day was a lot different for Harry than it had been last Friday. The moment class started, Severus Snape wrote his instruction on how to brew a basic antidote to common poisons, told his class to start working, then sat down in his desk and proceeded to glare at nothing. Or at least, that is what it looked like to everyone else.

Good thing Harry was not everyone else. The entire time he and Neville had been brewing their potion, the ornery Potions Professor had been sending him strange looks. Harry didn't know what to make of the man's staring, but decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth and simply proceeded to make his potion with Neville.

The potion itself was very easy to make. Harry already had six vials worth of Antidote to Common Poisons locked away inside of his trunk. The standard way of making it was to add four measures of crushed Bezoar to the cauldron, then add two measurements of Standard Ingredient—a mixture of herbs with many magical properties that were often used in potion brews. Once the ingredients were added, the cauldron needed to be heated to a medium temperature for five seconds, and afterwards, a small application of magic was required to get the ingredients to mix properly. Since Harry used a pewter cauldron, the brew needed to sit for 40-minutes, and then you added a pinch of ground Unicorn Horns followed by a clockwise stir, two mistletoe berries, two anti-clockwise stirs, and then another application of magic to complete the brew. If someone followed the instructions correctly, the entire process would take a little under the hour of class time they had.

Harry's process of making this particular potion was a little different. While he still used Bezoar and Unicorn Horns, he cut out the Standard Potion Ingredient and mistletoe berries and instead added Honeywater, mint sprigs, stewed Mandrake, and essence of lavender. The Honeywater and mint sprigs decreased the time the cauldron needed to sit be heated by fifteen minutes, and the stewed Mandrake and essence of lavender increased the potions potency by a factor of two. The overall result was a potion that was not only far better than the original, but also cut the time it took to brew the potion by a third.

Harry filled up four vials worth of the potion in vials charmed to be unbreakable. One went to him and another to Neville just in case either of them ever needed to use the antidote (you can never be too careful), one was used as a back up potion in case Severus Snape decided to sabotage the one they gave him, and the last Harry handed to the potions master and Head of Slytherin House.

When he handed over the potion, the greasy-haired professor had stared at him with that blank yet confused look for nearly five minutes before taking the offered potion. The man then dismissed him, and Harry had gone back to his seat next to Neville. On the way back he'd noticed Hermione giving him another nasty look.

Snape's actions had confused Harry, though it would be more accurate to say his lack of actions confused Harry. He remembered well what happened the first time they'd had potions class. How the man had insulted them before class even started. How he had singled out Harry and picked on him because of who his father was. How he had taken points from Gryffindor for the littlest of things and given points to the Slytherin's for 'looking smart while they worked.' None of that happened this class. There were no insults being bandied out, no points given or taken, no potions master stalking between desks and intimidating the Gryffindors. And most importantly, he hadn't insulted Harry once.

Harry wondered if perhaps their confrontation last class had made the man wary of him. Had their battle of the minds caused Snape to approach the class more cautiously? Or maybe he was trying to think of an explanation as to why Harry, a young boy of 11, was capable of Occlumency when most pureblood children only just started learning it? It could even be something as simple as the man keeping quiet due to knowing that Harry could, at any time, let out the knowledge that he had used Legillimency on a student. Doing such a thing may not get him thrown into Azkaban or even fired, but it would most certainly ruin his reputation and the board of governors may decide to crack down on his teaching method. In the end, Harry supposed the real reasons didn't matter, and decided to put it out of his mind. There were more important things to think about than why Snape was acting so unusual.

"Snape's acting pretty weird, don't you think?" Neville asked, breaking

Harry from his own thoughts. He gave the boy a small nod.

"He is. I was expecting him to try insulting me like yesterday, or at least give Slytherin some points for 'putting in their potion ingredients with flare' or something along those lines."

"What do you reckon's wrong with him?"

Harry glanced at Neville out of the corner of his eyes, then shrugged.

"Who knows. It's probably best not to think about it and just accept our good fortune while it lasts."

"I guess."

His gaze sweeping around the classroom, Harry noticed that all of the other students were still working diligently. A few would look at him and Neville, but once they realized he saw them they would look away. He wondered if they were trying to figure out how they'd completed the potion so fast.

Over at the Slytherin side of the classroom, Tracey Davis caught Harry's eye when she looked at him from where she was working with Daphne. He offered the girl a smile and was pleased when he got one in return. Daphne also seemed to notice the two making eye contact and her lips thinned into a line of displeasure. Harry was sure she would have sneered if doing so wouldn't have ruined her icy image.

When class let out, Harry and Neville followed the other Gryffindors to the entrance hall where they would head to their first Herbology lessons. The sun shone clearly when they reached the world outside. A pale blue sky with thin, wispy cirrus clouds sparsely populating the atmosphere greeted them.

Harry and Neville and the other Gryffindors reached the Greenhouses to see the Hufflepuffs already there. The greenhouses were long, rectangular buildings made of windows and a steel frame. Long, serpentine dragon statues ran along the roofs. From inside two of the three greenhouses, Harry could see vines of various thickness and sizes writhing and pressing against the glass windows.

"Susan, Hannah." Harry and Neville walked over to the pair of Hufflepuff girls. Hannah offered them the sunniest of smiles, while Susan gave them her own small smile.

"So how was potions?" Hannah asked curiously, eager to know how bad Professor Snape was to them this time.

"It went well actually," Harry said. "Professor Snape didn't say anything for the entire class. Just put the instructions on the board and told us to get to work. No insults, no taking points, nothing. It was rather nice, to be honest."

"Really?" Hannah blinked in surprise, then puffed her cheeks out. "That's not fair, he docked ten points from Sally-Ann Perks the other day when she asked him a question."

"I don't know what to tell you." Harry shrugged. "I guess he was just having one of those off days or something."

"I guess," Hannah sighed as Susan hid a smile from her friend. The red-haired Hufflepuff looked from Harry to Neville, then frowned.

"Are you alright, Neville?"

The smile that had been dotting Neville's face since potions ended grew larger.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just..." Susan paused, searching for the right word. "This morning you were so worried you looked like you were going to be sick, but now you look really happy."

"That's because we're having our first Herbology lesson," Harry said with a mild chuckle. "Neville's been looking forward to this lesson since the start of school. Right Neville?"

"You know me too well," Neville said, nodding. "I've read the entire course syllabus for this class, and the only thing I'm disappointed about is that we won't be using any greenhouse other than greenhouse one. I

heard that greenhouses two and three are the ones that have all the rare plants in them."

"They would also have the more dangerous plants in them," Harry added. "Which is probably why we're not allowed inside."

"I know." Neville looked very disheartened. Harry withheld a chuckle. It seemed that the boy's Gryffindor bravery only came out when faced with the possibility of interacting with dangerous plants capable of killing humans.

There was no more time for conversation as Professor Sprout arrived, padding lightly down the dirt path and stopping in front of the students.

"Good day everyone!" The Professor greeted in a cheerful voice. "For those of you who do not know me, my name is Pomona Sprout, and I will be your Herbology teacher for your time here at Hogwarts. Now then, if you will follow me into greenhouse one we can get started."

Professor Sprout unlocked the door leading into greenhouse one and walked in, the students following behind her dutifully. The greenhouse was currently empty, save for a few weedy looking plants that Harry recognized as mundane weeds. The Herbology professor had the students line up on the opposite side from the plants while she stood in front of a large desk.

"Herbology," Professor Sprout began once everyone was situated, "is the study of magical and mundane plants and fungi. In this class, I will be teaching you how to properly care for, handle and utilize various types of plants. You will learn about their magical properties, and what they can be used for in our society."

The first half of Herbology class was essentially a lecture on what they would be learning during the year. Harry was a bit disappointed when he heard they would not be dealing with very many actual plants, but focusing on lectures and theoretical knowledge on how to deal with certain plants such as the Devil's Snare.

If Harry was disappointed then Neville was downright gloomy. A quick glance at the boy revealed how disgraced he felt. His shoulders were drooped, sagging and lowered in disappointment at hearing they would

not be physically handling many plants.

After the lecture on the course syllabus, Professor Sprout told them the best way to handle most plants: fire.

"Which among you can tell me the best spell to use when struggling with an unfriendly plant?" Naturally, the moment Professor Sprout posed her question, Hermione Granger's hand was in the air, the appendage shaking with eagerness.

"Yes, Ms. Granger?"

"The incendio charm, professor," Hermione stated in her lecturing voice. "The fire-making spell. In order to cast it you have to point your wand at whatever you want to set on fire and chant, *incendio*."

"Marvelous work, Ms. Granger!" Professor Sprout praised. "Take five points for Gryffindor."

Hermione sent Harry another one of her smug looks. Harry ignored her.

"Now then everyone, I want you to point your wands at those weeds you see on the other side of the greenhouse and say *incendio*."

At once many of the students made to follow the Herbology professor's instructions. None of them managed to get the charm right, though Hermione's wand did produce a puff from its tip.

Once again, Harry didn't cast the spell immediately, but instead thought about how a spell like the *incendio* would work. Given what it did, it was obviously a fire elemental spell. A lower level one since it was being taught to first years. It probably didn't need much more than intent and an incantation to cast. You had to want the fire to come out and burn your target. At least, that's what he assumed.

"*Incendio*," Harry muttered as he pointed his wand at the weeds across the greenhouse. From the tip of his wand, a bright, orange and red flame roared into existence. On either side of him, Neville and Hannah jumped away in shock. The cylinder of flames spewed from the tip of Harry's wand, crashing into the weed he targeted, and burning it until there was

nothing but ash. Only then did Harry cut off the power he put into the spell.

A small frown appeared on his face as he checked his core. That spell had used more energy than he thought it would. At least two times more energy than any of the charms he had cast so far, even some of the more advanced charms they wouldn't be taught until third year hadn't taken this much energy.

He wondered at this. Was it because this was an elemental spell? Perhaps creating an element simply took more magic? Well, he supposed it didn't matter for the moment. So long as he could cast the spell everything would be fine. He could always do an independent study on elemental magic later.

"Excellent job, Mr. Potter!" Professor Sprout cheered loudly. "I did not expect anyone to get the spell right today, much less master it on their first try. Take ten points for Gryffindor."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry replied, absentmindedly nodding in her direction. Several students away, Hermione Granger glared at him.

After lunch Harry and Neville found themselves making their way to their first flying lesson with the other Gryffindors. They walked through a hall and out of an archway that expanded into a large courtyard. Harry estimated it to be about fifty square meters in total. It was a clear field of green grass with no trees or shrubs of any kind, probably so students wouldn't crash into them while learning to fly, Harry guessed.

He noticed as soon as he and the other lions entered that the brooms they would be using were already there, laid out on the ground in a single file line.

A frown crossed his face as his eyes zeroed in on the condition of the brooms. He had heard from the Weasley twins that the brooms the school gave them to use were in horrible condition, but he had not been sure if he should truly believe them until now. The brooms were not just in bad shape, they were horrendous! The wood used to make of the shafts of the broom were scratched and scuffed and looked like they had not been serviced in ages. Several even had large cracks on them that would

probably hamper their ability to make drastic course corrections. Many of the twigs at the ends were broken or bent, which from his father's lectures when he would take Harry flying let him know that would affect their aerodynamics. In short, the brooms being used by the school were not only pieces of crap, they were also incredibly dangerous, especially to first timers.

And why? Harry wondered. Why wasn't the school doing something about this? Did they lack the funding to buy better brooms? Or was there some other reason he couldn't determine? Either way, something would have to be done. Children their age shouldn't be using such dangerous equipment.

The Slytherins were already outside, huddling together a ways off. Most of them seemed to be listening to Draco who told everyone that it was travesty that first years weren't allowed to bring a broom, and how much better their Quidditch team would be if he was allowed to join. Harry did notice that while many of the Slytherins were paying rapt attention to the boy, Blaise, Daphne and Tracey looked almost bored to tears.

The three were standing at the edge of the crowd, and while to the average eye it looked like they were paying attention to everything Draco said, he could easily see they were only pretending.

Blaise's expression looked the same as it always did, that being a general look of aloofness and distance. However, Harry could see the hard lines around his eyes. They made him look slightly strained, as if he was just barely resisting the urge to roll them.

Surprisingly enough Harry could not get a read on the pretty blond next to the dark-skinned pureblood. Daphne Greengrass' expression was, as always, colder than a winters night in Antarctica. And yet, while her expression remained the same, her stance betrayed her irritation. Her arms were crossed and she was putting more weight on her right leg than her left, which he had been able to notice through her thick school robes due to the way her figure tilted. The crossing of her arms, her distance, and the stance she assumed were often signs of someone who was annoyed.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tracey Davis was not masking her boredom at all. Everything from her stance to the annoyed look in her eyes to the way she was nearly scowling at Draco told Harry that she was not at all pleased with the blond boy's bragging.

This did not surprise Harry one bit. He knew that Tracey Davis was not a pureblood but a half-blood. Her father was a pureblood from a minor house, and her mother was a muggleborn that her father married shortly after they graduated from Hogwarts. Given that her father had gone against tradition and was considered the black sheep of his family, it would make sense that he had not taught his daughter much about pureblood traditions and social etiquette.

It made him wonder about just how she and Daphne had become friends in the first place.

His internal musings were interrupted by the arrival of their flight instructor.

Much like Professor McGonagall, Madam Rolanda Hooch looked like a woman you wouldn't want to cross lightly, if at all. Her gray hair was cut in short spikes that were swept about her face, like she had just come back from flying. Her eyes were a sharp, piercing yellow like those of a hawk, and her face held the kind of no nonsense look that he had seen on the Transfiguration teacher. She wore a white button-down collared shirt and a black necktie with the Hogwarts crest under her cloak.

"Alright everyone!" Madam Hooch shouted over the talking students. Almost immediately everyone quieted down. "Don't just stand around! Line up next to the broom so we can get started!"

Well, the woman certainly wasn't one for eloquent words and long-winded speeches like, that's for sure. That suited Harry just fine. He and Neville followed the instructor's advice and lined up next to a broom.

"Now, I want you all to stick out your right hand above your broom and say 'up!'"

"Up!" everyone shouted at once.

Harry's broom immediately flew into his hand, but he noticed that his was one of the only ones to have done so. Malfoy had gotten his to shoot up as well, showing that while he may be a braggart he was not just puffing hot air. Tracey's had also flown into her hands the moment she had spoken. Along with her, Blaise had managed get his up after a couple of tries and Daphne followed soon after.

On the Gryffindor side of things, it looked like Harry was the only person who had gotten his broom to respond. Seamus Finnigan's broom had jumped into the air a few inches of the ground, then fell back down. It took him several tries to get it into his hand. Hermione Granger's had rolled over a couple of times, but not much else. And Neville's hadn't done anything at all.

"You need to be more commanding," Harry said to Neville as the Longbottom heir tried to unsuccessfully call his broom to his hand again. "In many ways brooms are a lot like horses. They can sense your fear and desire not to ride them. You need take a more commanding stance. Don't just say 'up' and expect it to respond. You have to mean it, you need to want the broom in your hand."

The Longbottom heir looked at him for several seconds, before taking a deep breath and giving it another try.

"Up!" He commanded, his voice much louder and without the quaver it held earlier. This time the broom did shoot up into Neville's hand. Unfortunately, Neville had been so unprepared for it that the broom had smacked off his hand and almost fell back to the ground had Harry's own hand not shot out and caught it.

"Thanks, Harry," Neville said with an embarrassed blush as Harry handed the boy his broom.

"You're welcome," Harry responded with an amused smile.

After everyone had a broom in hand, Madam Hooch showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, walking up and down the row helping students correct their grip.

"What do you mean I'm doing it wrong?" asked an indignant Draco

Malfoy when Madam Hooch told him that his grip on the broom was wrong. "This is how I've been doing it for years!"

"Then you have been doing it wrong for years," the instructor with hawk-like eyes said in a stern voice. "Your grip on the broom is too loose and your holding the shaft too close to the ends of the broom. Not only will that make it more difficult to control, but it also heightens the chance of your hands sliding off the end during maneuvering."

The scowl on Draco Malfoy's face as he was thoroughly humiliated was incredibly amusing. Harry did feel a bit guilty for taking pleasure in another person's suffering, but he was beginning to dislike the Malfoy heir thanks to what he had done this morning. Getting Neville's self-confidence up was hard enough already; he didn't need Malfoy's bullying making things even harder.

And Harry noticed he wasn't the only one who was taking perverse pleasure in the boy's humiliation. While Blaise and Daphne looked pretty indifferent to the whole thing, with Blaise only showing the smallest of smirks, their brunette friend had no such subtlety and blatantly snickered behind her hand at the blond boy's embarrassment.

As if feeling his eyes on her, Tracey Davis looked over at him curiously. Harry gave her the tiniest of grins, then tilted his head towards Draco Malfoy, who was red-faced as Madam Hooch finished correcting his handling of his broom. Her eyes lit up when she realized he, too, found the Malfoy heir's situation amusing and mouthed the word 'idiot' while pointing to the blond boy.

Both Blaise and Daphne seemed to notice the small interaction, but where Blaise's smirk widened when he cottoned on to what their silent communication was about, Daphne simply gave him her iciest glare and looked away, determined to ignore him.

Harry didn't let Daphne's coldness bother him too much. From what he had seen she was cold to everyone save Tracey and Blaise, and even with the dark-skinned pureblood she tended to keep her distance.

Though he did have to wonder about her cold personality. It was most intriguing considering how her best friend Tracey was so friendly and

open. How had she turned out like this? Why was she so cold to everyone? Was it some kind of defense mechanism? Perhaps someone had hurt her in the past and she closed herself off to all those but the few she could trust? It could even be something as simple as that just being her personality, though Harry doubted it. More than likely it had something to do with her family.

Perhaps one of her parents or a relative of hers was abusive? He didn't know, couldn't know, and so he put it out of his mind for now. Thinking up theories of how a person acted without having any information to confirm or deny his theories was foolish. He would eventually crack the mystery surrounding Daphne, but he couldn't let it consume him.

He was brought out of his thoughts when Madam Hooch began speaking after making sure everyone had mounted their brooms properly. "Now, when I blow my whistle I want you all to kick off from the ground hard."

"Don't kick off the ground hard," Harry whispered quietly so that only Neville could hear. The other boy looked at him in confusion for contradicting a teacher, but Harry just smiled. "She's telling you to do that because most people require to kick off harder than normal in order to get into the air, but you can also lose control that way. Instead of kicking off the ground, simply pull the handle of your broom up and stand on your toes."

Neville didn't have a chance to respond to Harry because Madam Hooch chose that moment to speak again. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle, three—two—one!"

As Madam Hooch blew on her whistle, everyone tried their best to rise into the air. Hermione didn't have much luck at first, too nervous to actually kick off the ground, and instead tried jumping up and down. It didn't work and Madam Hooch had to go over and instruct her.

Seamus and Dean had a bit more luck. Seamus managed to get off the ground, but his broom wobbled and he kept slipping from one side to the other. Dean, surprisingly, did much better than Seamus and managed to stay on his broom.

Tracey and Draco both did well. Whether or not the blond-haired boy really was as skilled as he claimed, Harry could not deny that he at least looked comfortable on his broom. Likewise, Tracey Davis seemed to almost be a natural, especially compared to her friends, both of whom managed to get their brooms into the air, but looked mildly uncomfortable as they did so.

Perhaps the most surprising person there was Neville. His broom managed to lift into the air by following Harry's instructions. Oh he certainly didn't look like a natural, and seemed to be extremely nervous despite not being more than a foot off the ground, but at the very least he had managed full lift off.

"You're doing good, Neville," Harry encouraged as he floated several feet off the ground. It had been easy for him to get his broom to do what he wanted, and he suspected it may have had something to do with his dad's natural talent at riding a broom. Could a person's talent on a broom be a genetic trait, per chance? Something to think of later on. "Just keep a firm grip on the handle. Now, slowly pull it up—that's it—now tilt the handle back down."

Harry watched as Neville's feet hit the ground and nodded. The boy had done most admirably considering he looked like he wanted to pass out while in the air.

"See," Harry said as he followed Neville's example and landed on the ground. "It's not as hard as it looks, is it?"

"If you say so, Harry," Neville replied, still looking incredibly shaken. "Even so, I don't think I'll be getting on a broom again any time soon."

Harry gave the boy a nod. "That's fine. Not everyone enjoys flying. What's important is that you managed to stay on your broom and didn't get injured or embarrass yourself, which is more than I can say for them." At the word 'them' Harry hooked a thumb over to Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown, both of whom had not even succeeded in getting their broom into the air. Neville gave a mild chuckle and grinned unsurely at him.

"Ok everyone!" Madam Hooch called for order. "We only have fifteen

minutes of class left, so I am going to allow you some free time. Those of you who wish to continue flying may do so as long as you remain where I can see you. Those who do not wish to continue, place your brooms on the ground and step off to the side so you do not get injured by anyone who may decide to do something reckless."

Of the kids who had gone through the lesson, only a few decided to continue; Tracey Davis, Draco Malfoy, Seamus Finnigan, Dean Thomas, Theodore Nott and Harry Potter. Everyone else had moved off to the side where they would not get hurt on accident if someone ended up losing control of their broom.

Harry quickly walked up to Tracey as Madam Hooch told them to get in line. His actions drew perplexed or surprised looks from everyone. Like always, he ignored them in favor of talking to Tracey.

"You seem pretty comfortable on a broom," Harry complimented, his words causing Tracey to smile at him.

"Were you watching me, Potter?" asked Tracey, her eyes glinting with amusement.

"As much as I watched everybody else," Harry informed her with a smile. "And it's Harry. Or as Daphne convinced you to call me Potter now?"

Tracey laughed at his words, and her eyes moved over to where Blaise and Daphne were standing. Harry followed her gaze and saw that while Blaise looked amused to see him spending time with a Slytherin, Daphne was favoring him with a cold glare. Harry also noticed out of the corner of his eye that Draco was scowling at him and Tracey.

He shrugged both of the looks off and turned back to Tracey.

"No, Daphne hasn't said anything about what I should call you," she told him with a grin. "But you know how it is, house politics demand I call you Potter, since, you know, everyone else in the house seems to call you that."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"You didn't strike me as the type who cared about house politics."

"What?" Tracey gave him her best haughty glare. It wasn't very convincing, considering her lips kept twitching into a grin. "You think I don't care about what the *esteemed* members of my house think of me?"

"Yes," Harry said with a nod. "That is exactly what I think."

Tracey huffed. "Alright, fine. So maybe Daphne might have said something about how I shouldn't get all chummy with you because it would ruin what standing I have with my house."

"Did she really say that?"

"Well, not quite like that," Tracey admitted. "It was more like 'you shouldn't spend time with Potter; he's only using you for his own gain and it will be even more difficult to protect you from our housemates if you befriend him.'"

"Not very trusting, is she?" Harry asked, just barely managing to contain his wince. While he wouldn't quite call what he was doing manipulating someone for his own gain, he also couldn't deny that he was straddling a very fine line between using others solely for his own gain and helping them via forming alliances. It was a difficult thing, trying to further his goals without using others for his own benefit, and every day he had to constantly think about how to advance those goals without sacrificing his morals.

"As I said, she's not like that with just you but everyone," Tracey reassured him. "She's been like that ever since..."

"Ever since?" Harry's tone turned questioning when Tracey trailed off.

"Nothing," she told him with a grimace. "She's just been like that for a while. It's just how she is."

Harry's brow furrowed. Now he was definitely curious. There was clearly something going on with Daphne, some reason that explained why she acted so cold towards everyone. And Tracey knew of it, or at least, she knew something about it.

He was tempted to question her, but withheld himself. Whatever secrets Daphne had were clearly things she didn't want others to know, and it would be remiss of him to try and pry that information from her friend.

It would also strain Tracey's friendship with the blond girl, and that wasn't something Harry was willing to do. Again, it came down to morals. What lines was he willing to cross. Destroying a friendship for his own gain was not something he was comfortable doing.

No, he would crack the mystery surrounding Daphne without using her friend to do it. It was better to get knowledge straight from the source anyway. He just needed to find a way around that cold personality of hers. It would take time, but Harry was sure he could get Daphne over on his side eventually.

In the reviews for my last chapter, I noticed that some people were ragging on Daphne for being a bitch to someone she didn't even know. I do hope that this chapter at least helped assuage people a little bit about why her personality is so cold. There is something going on with her that we're simply not seeing yet, but will eventually be revealed later on.

Now, I do hope you all enjoyed the chapter. I don't know when the next one will come out as I'm trying to figure out the best way to write what I want to have happen. In the meantime please let me know what you think about this chapter. Any constructive criticism is highly appreciated.

Quidditch Try-Outs

Quidditch Try-Outs

"Harry!"

I felt an exhausted sigh threaten to escape as I turned around to face my tormentor. For nearly two weeks the girl I had rescued from Dudley and his friends had been bothering me nonstop. Every morning at school she would find me and greet me with a big hug, and every time lunch came about she would be waiting right outside my classroom. I'm not even sure how she found out which classroom was mine.

"Lisa," I said, staring at the brunette with a blank look. "What do you—gurk." A choked noise escaped my throat as Lisa hugged me tightly. I really should have expected this, yet for some reason, the action still caught me off guard. Fortunately, she let go moments later, though I could tell from how my face felt like it had caught fire that I was still blushing.

"What was that for?" I hissed. Lisa just smiled at me.

"That was my good morning greeting," she said as if it should be obvious, which it obviously wasn't. "Good morning."

"You already said that," I mumbled irritably. I really didn't know what to make of this girl. Ever since that time with Dudley and his ilk she'd been clinging to me like glue. I'd tried ditching her several times and told her off exactly 365 times, but nothing I said or did worked. She continued following me like some kind of faithful puppy. It was extremely annoying.

"Well, I'm saying it again," Lisa declared almost proudly. "And I'll say it a million more times until you say good morning too."

I pinched the bridge of my nose to stem the coming migraine and pondered what to do. I couldn't just be rude and terrible to her—I refused to do something that had even a chance of sending me back down that

dark path I'd escaped from—but politely trying to deny her friendship didn't seem to be working.

Guess there was no helping it.

"Good morning, Lisa," I said, averting my eyes. The way her eyes seemed to sparkle disturbed me.

"You finally did it!" The girl cheered. "Yes!" Before I had a chance to sneak off, Lisa linked arms with me. "And now that we're friends you can walk me to my class."

"What?" I mumbled in shock before Lisa began dragging me behind her. "H-hold up, I never said anything about us being friends!"

"Of course you did," she chided, smiling brightly at me. "Just now you greeted me like a friend would. That makes us friends."

"It does not!"

"Now, to class!"

"Let go of me! Lisa!"

XoX

"The levitation charm was first invented in the sixteenth century with Jarleth Hobart being credited as its creator, though he had actually mistaken it for a flying spell rather than a simple charm that let him levitate objects into the air. He had been so caught up in his own euphoria at thinking he could fly that on July fifteenth fifteen-forty-four he somehow managed to convince a large number of witches in wizards, including the, at the time, Chief Warlock of the Wizeongamot to see his... 'maiden voyage.'"

Harry's small lecture/story on the Wingardium Leviosa was interrupted by a stifled giggle from Hannah Abbot and a loud laugh from one Tracey Davis. The two had asked him for help on their Charms essay as Charms was their weakest subject. Well, Charms was Hannah's weakest subject, Tracey was just horrible at writing essays period—she was good at

charms though.

Giving the pair a grin, Harry waited until their laughter died down, purposefully ignoring the baleful glare sent his way by the librarian, one Madam Pince.

"You think that's good, wait until you hear this. After an extremely rousing speech about how he had discovered flight, and a national anthem being played in his honor by a popular at the time orchestra, he cast the spell upon himself and leapt off the roof of a church he had climbed onto."

"At first it looked like he had succeeded. There he was, hovering in mid air. Naturally, people were enthralled. However, after staring at him for nearly three minutes, in which time he continued to simply hover there, many people began to grow impatient and tried booing him off his proverbial stage."

"In response to the negative comments he was receiving, Jarleth Hobart tried moving in mid air by doggy paddling, which, by the way, was not successful. He stayed exactly where he was." More snickers met his words and Harry looked to see that Blaise, Lisa, Neville, Susan and Terry were now all listening to him as well. "In either event, when that didn't work he began to mistakenly believe that his clothes were making him heavier and thus impeding his movement..."

Harry trailed off here, waiting for the others to figure out where he was going on their own. Tracy was the first to get where he was going. She gasped, then paced a hand to her mouth as she stifled what was likely to be uproarious laughter. The others soon followed with their own reactions, all of which were fairly amusing.

"He didn't!"

"He did," Harry said with an almost solemn nod that was belied by his grin. "Wanting to show everyone that he could, in fact, fly, Hobart proceeded to remove all of his clothing in the hopes that it would allow him to gain the ability of flight."

By now everyone looked like they were hardly containing themselves. Tracey had almost literally stuffed her fist into her mouth to stop herself

from laughing, and Hannah was only a little better off. Neville and Susan were both red in the face and looked like they were just barely restraining themselves from openly laughing. Lisa was wearing the most amused smile he had ever seen, and Terry had his hands clamped over his mouth keeping his lips shut by pinching them together with his fingers. Even the normally stoic Blaise looked like he was having a hard time keeping the grin off his face.

"However, what Hobart didn't know was that his clothes were actually the only thing keeping him airborne. You see, because it is extremely difficult to cast magic on something magical in nature like a witch or wizard due to the inherent magical resistance they have, he had ended up casting it on his clothes. So, when he stripped himself naked there was nothing holding him up." He paused, and his grin widened when he saw the others struggling even harder to contain their laughter. "I'm sure you all can imagine what happened. He fell to the ground quite hard after that and ended up breaking sixteen bones on the way down. He then went on to receive a penalty of extraordinary stupidity from the Chief Warlock."

His last statement seemed to be the final straw for what little self-restraint most of them had. Tracey Davis burst out in laughter, her voice so boisterous and loud that many of the other students around their table glared at the girl. Tears literally streaming down her face, she held onto her stomach like her laughter was actually causing physical pain.

Hannah was giggling and snorting into her hand, a mortified look on her face due to the fact that she was doing something as unfeminine as snorting. Despite clearly wanting to stop embarrassing herself further, she seemed incapable of doing anything other than continuing to show her amusement in the most embarrassing way possible.

The two shyest of the group of friends, Neville and Susan, finally lost the battle to contain their own amusement and were chortling and giggling into their hands. Neville looked like he was gasping for air as he continued to laugh and Susan was crying tears of mirth, one hand hiding her grinning lips while the other was on her stomach.

Harry's Ravenclaw friends were not much better. Terry was actually on the floor holding his gut as he heaved deep, ragged gasps of breath from

all the laughing he'd done. Harry could occasionally make out the other boy wheezing out words like 'naked' and 'stupidity,' but not much else managed to escape from Terry's mouth. Meanwhile, Lisa had buried her face into the book laid out before her as she fruitlessly tried to cover her own reaction. Harry just hoped she hadn't drooled on that book or Madam Pince would be even madder than she was now!

Out of the seven sitting with him, only Blaise had managed to refrain from laughing like a loon, but even he was having trouble keeping his amusement from showing. The Italian boy was currently disguising his laughter as a cough that he hid behind his closefisted hand.

"Where..." Tracey gasped out as she continued to hold her stomach. She was sucking in deep breaths now, trying to gain the oxygen she had been unable to take in during her intense bout of laughter. "Where did you find this information? I never saw any of this in the book."

"Did you even read the book?" asked a smirking Blaise. Tracey scowled at her friend, the blush on her face not only making it ineffective, but also letting everyone at the table know that she had not actually read the book. This brought another round of not as intense laughter to the group, and served to make the brunette Slytherin's blush grow.

"I actually didn't find it in the book," Terry informed Blaise as he dragged himself back into his seat. He was still gasping a bit, and the occasional snicker escaped his mouth as he smirked at the dark skinned boy. "And I *did* actually read it."

Blaise chortled behind his hand while Tracey's blush and scowl deepened. She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to ineffectively glare at the pair.

"Are you two done making fun of me?"

Blaise's eyes held a sense of mischief to them as he shrugged his shoulders and said, "for the moment."

"Tracey's general laziness aside," Harry began, grinning when Tracey's eyes landed on him and gave him a betrayed glare. "The reason you probably couldn't find this information is because it's at the end of the

book as an excerpt to the levitation charm. You see, it wasn't originally called the levitation charm, which is actually considered an improved version of what Hobart created. At the time it was called the Hover Charm, or *Levioso*, not only due to the fact that it allowed one to hover in midair, but also because that was *all* it could do. You couldn't make the hovering object move or do anything other than hover. The charm was later improved upon and became what we know as the levitation charm today."

Harry ended his small lecture with a shrug.

"Still, the information is not only entertaining but also potentially useful." He looked over at Hannah and Tracey (who was still looking at him like he had betrayed her). "I figured you two could use this bit to add in that extra four inches Flitwick asked for on your assignment. I'm sure he'd get a kick out of it."

After nearly a month of theoretical lectures, Professor Flitwick had finally told them they were going to be learning the levitation charm. However, he wanted them to study the charm first and write up a ten inch essay on its history, mechanics and uses in every day wizarding society.

Harry already knew the charm inside and out, having studied and practiced the spell on his own during the night before he did his meditations and went to bed. He had even finished the essay (as well as the rest of this weeks homework) before the study session he and his friends had taken to having every Saturday after breakfast.

This was done with a two part purpose. One, he wanted to be done with his homework as soon as it was assigned so he could focus on his more important tasks during the week. And two, so that he could provide assistance to his friends when they asked for it. This had been a very good idea because almost all of his friends asked for help with something, and Harry was well-known by now at excelling in every class they had.

School had actually been going very well for Harry Potter. He was always the top in every single one of his classes, was always the first to get every spell right and always got it on the very first try (in class at least),

and was always providing help to the other students, much to his teacher's delight.

There was some jealousy of his academic prowess from a few of the students. It was an unfortunate consequence of excelling in everything he did. While many people were assuaged by the fact that he was perfectly happy to help them, a few of the more academically-oriented students who enjoyed being at the top of their class tended to glare at him when he tried to help them. During these instances Harry would just focus on that old saying about how you couldn't please them all. No matter how hard he worked at being liked and respected by his peers, there would always be some that he simply would not be able to please.

One of these people that he took particular notice of was Hermione Granger, the muggleborn witch who was consistently near the top of every class. She was usually the second or third—though there were other times when she was fifth or even sixth—to get a spell right and had steadfastly refused his help. Lately he had noticed that the girl had been looking rather despondent. She seemed much more withdrawn than usual and had even stopped lecturing her fellow Gryffindors whenever she was in the house common room.

In fact, he rarely ever saw her in the common room except when she was passing through, either up to her room or into the castle proper. According to rumor (Padma and Lavender), Hermione would often disappear for several hours at a time and no one knew where she went, though many (Padma and Lavender) said they had seen her crying.

Harry wasn't quite sure what to think of that. If he were honest, he did feel bad for the girl. At the same time, it wasn't really his fault. Yes, he was doing better than her in all of their classes, and he had even helped people surpass her in some of them, but it wasn't as if he had not offered her the same help as well. Indeed, Harry had tried multiple times to help the girl out, but was rebuffed each time.

In the end, he had just decided to give up. You couldn't help those who didn't want it. And who knows, maybe she would come around in time.

Surprisingly, the only subject he was not the best in was Herbology,

where he was currently tied for the rankings of first place with Neville.

Of course, saying he was not the best usually implied that he was in second place, not tied for first. It was only due to Harry's innate competitive streak and sense of fair play that made him refuse to admit he was first in that class. Harry had several very distinct advantages over Neville, not the least of which was his eidetic memory. Despite the fact that Harry got perfect grades without even needing to do much studying beyond what he felt like doing to go above and beyond what was required in his academia, Neville was *still* tied with him for first. For this reason, Harry conceded that Neville was simply better at that particular subject than he was, painful though it was to admit.

"You're right about that," Terry said, his voice now clear after finally managing to regain control over his breathing. "Flitwick would definitely be amused to learn this. He'd probably get a few laughs even if he already knows."

Professor Filius Flitwick was definitely one of their favorite teachers. Unlike the stern Professor McGonagall, the scowling Snape, or the overly happy and cheerful Professor Sprout, Professor Flitwick was the kind of teacher who was not only easy to talk to, but also had a sense of humor and didn't mind making fun of himself in order to get a point across.

That was not to say none of the other teacher's had their good points. Harry was actually quite fond of his Head of House, though a part of this may have been due to her partiality towards him. It was a very subtle thing, but it was quite clear to Harry that she favored him, in part due to his own talent in Transfiguration, but also because of who his parents were. He was not sure how he felt about that, as it was his belief that teachers should be impartial regardless of personal feelings.

Still, in spite of her favoritism he knew enough about the woman to know that, even if she *did* favor him, it would not be enough to keep him out of trouble should he actually do something that warrants a scolding. God only knows how many times she scolded his father for doing something stupid.

His musings on the various teachers and their methods of instructing

students was halted when a stern and angry voice spoke to the group.

"Excuse me, but if you lot are going to continue to be so loud, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Harry turned to look at the angry form of Madam Irma Pince. Madam Pince was a very irritable-looking woman, the kind who looked like she might start spewing fire at the slightest provocation. She also reminded Harry of an underfed vulture. Her skin was rough and leathery, like parchment, her cheeks were sunken and hollow, her face was shriveled with wrinkles, and she had an unflattering hook nose. She was also very thin, something Harry noticed through her thick robes. Yes, underfed vulture was definitely the most apt description for her.

"I'm very sorry, Madam Pince," Harry said, bowing to the woman and adopting a regretful and properly chastised face. "I am afraid my friends and I were so caught up in some humorous facts we had learned while doing our homework that we forgot ourselves. I promise that it will never happen again."

If it were at all humanly possible and would not have given him away, Harry would have given himself a pat on the back for his acting skills. If being a wizard failed he could always just go to Hollywood and become a world famous actor, he thought with an amusement that he refused to show the others.

In the meantime, he would begin looking up silencing charms. While the standard muffling spell was useful, it not only *didn't* block out noise in its entirety, but only ensured that noise could not move through an inanimate object, such as a door or window. He would need something that created a bubble of silence between him and his friends and the rest of the world so they could talk with impunity.

Madam Pince continued to glare sternly at Harry as he stood up from his bow. Her angry gaze swept across to the other seven with him, all of whom except for Blaise flinched when it was directed at them. She eventually went back to looking at Harry, before giving him a stiff nod.

"See that it doesn't, Mr. Potter."

As the strict woman walked off, muttering about 'disrespectful brats who don't know how to respect her library' under her breath, Harry Potter turned around to see most of his friends staring at him in shock. Or as was the case with Tracey, awe.

"What?" he asked, actually feeling uncomfortable. He felt as if he had suddenly been put on the spot without knowing why. It almost reminded him of that 'Punked' show Lisa occasionally watched.

"How did you do that?" asked Tracey.

"Do what?" asked Harry, blinking several times before he realized what she was asking about. "You mean how did I get Madam Pince to not kick us out?" When Tracey nodded her head emphatically, looking almost like those bauble heads, he grinned. "Why do you want to know?"

"Why do I want to know?" Tracey parroted incredulously. "What do you mean 'why do I want to know?' Do you know how awesome it would be to get out of trouble with nothing but a few words? If I could do what you just did with my parents, I would never have to worry about being grounded for sneaking out into the backyard at night so I could fly my broom without supervision again."

Harry just barely withheld his snort. Leave it to Tracey Davis to get in trouble for something like that. If there was one thing he had learned about the Slytherin girl it was that she was one of the biggest broom fanatics this side of Hogwarts. She loved everything about brooms, every single fact and facet regardless of how useless, she knew it all. This, of course, included things like which Quidditch star used which brand of brooms, how long they had them, and how many times they had been forced to get them replaced for one reason or another; she even knew the reason each broom had been replaced.

She was also a complete Quidditch fanatic, and could debate facts on the sport for hours without end. Harry knew this from personal experience.

"Well, I suppose that's as good a reason as any," Harry replied with a mild dose of sarcasm. The grin on his face as he sat down next to her and Hannah let the girl know he was joking. "So you want to know my secret to escaping unfavorable predicaments with people like teachers

and parents?"

Tracey blinked several times at the large vocabulary he had just used. While the girl wasn't dumb by any stretch of the imagination, few if any of the people she knew used such complicated words. Harry just liked saying large, complex multi-syllable words because it made him sound more intelligent. After a moment or two she gave him another nod.

"Well," Harry leaned in and cupped a hand to his mouth, as if he were about to share some great secret. Tracey, eager to learn how he could get himself out of trouble time and time again with mere words, leaned in to hear his words of wisdom.

Harry smiled as his mouth stopped right next to her ear. The others also leaned in, hoping to learn his secret as well.

"It's a secret."

"Prat!" Tracey hissed as she took a swipe at him. Harry chuckled as he leaned back and rubbed the shoulder she smacked.

"That really hurt you know," Harry said with a small grin. "Is this how you show your appreciation after all the assistance I've given you with your classwork?" he moaned piteously while tossing the others a wink. "I don't know if I can continue to help such a violent and unruly girl."

"You did kind of deserve it, Harry," Hannah informed him, speaking up before Tracey could. Said girl huffed at Harry, but decided let the pig-tailed blond speak for her. Being the closest to the pair, she had been able to hear his words much more clearly than the others, and would admit to being disappointed about not learning how he could be so persuasive. "I kind of want to hit you myself."

"But you wouldn't do that, would you, Hannah?" asked Harry with slightly pleading eyes. Hannah flushed a bit, and Harry continued. "You're not like that abusive and violent girl over there, are you?" he continued, pointing over at Tracey.

"Oi!"

"Of course not," Hannah said, turning her head away from Harry for a second. "But that doesn't mean I'm not disappointed. And while I wouldn't hit you, I wouldn't stop Tracey from hitting you either."

Harry tried to give Hannah his best pout. Unfortunately pouting was not an expression he had ever practiced before, so his face looked more comical than cute and caused his friends to laugh at him. Huffing, Harry fought to contain a smile as he saw how well his unification plan was working.

The transition from thinking in terms of Houses to that of a unified group of friends from different walks of life had not been seamless; there was still the occasional problem, but it was going much more smoothly than he had originally anticipated. Really, the only issues that had cropped up was when Blaise and Tracey had shown up to study with them that first Saturday.

It wasn't anything they had done wrong, in fact, Tracey had been rather nervous about sitting with a bunch of people from other Houses. No doubt many of the older students of her House had informed them about how the other Houses hated and distrusted people in Slytherin simply for being in the House of Snakes, and it had given her a fear of opening up to people not of her House. She had actually been on her best behavior because of that.

No, the problem had not come from the two Slytherins but from everyone else. It was a very unfortunate circumstance, but the fact of the matter was that whoever had informed Tracey of the distrust the other three Houses held against Slytherin had been right. No one trusted the House of Snakes. All of the first years in the other three Houses had been told of how untrustworthy Slytherins were and warned to watch out for them. This led to his other friends becoming quiet and tense when Blaise and Tracey showed up.

This hadn't stopped Harry though. In an effort to breach the gap dividing Slytherin from the other three houses, he had spent most of that study session talking to Blaise and Tracey. He helped them with their homework, talked with them about their interests and hobbies, and did everything he could to not only make them feel comfortable but let the

others know that he trusted them.

Trust was the main issue here. No one trusted anyone from Slytherin because of the misbegotten rumors that Slytherin produced Dark Wizards. Once again, Harry had to curse that damnable fool, Voldemort, for ruining a once noble house with his mad ideals and idiocy. The stain brought about by the actions of the most recent Dark Lord even made people forget that Merlin himself, a man not only known for being the most powerful wizard in existence, but also for being the most muggle friendly wizard in history, had been in Slytherin House. Were Voldemort not already dead, Harry would've mercilessly crushed the man for making his goals that much more difficult.

Despite the minor hardship that came with two Slytherins joining their study group, the others eventually overcame their differences and now Tracey and Blaise were as much a part of the group as Susan and Hannah were.

He now had friends in all four houses, and once people began to see that the rivalries certain houses held for each other (Slytherin and Gryffindor) could be overcome, he would be able to expand his influence into each house with more ease.

"What about you, Susan?" Harry turned his attention to the redhead who, upon being put in the spotlight, let out an 'eep!' as her cheeks took on a light pink coloration. It was actually an improvement from the way her entire face used to turn as red whenever he addressed her. "You're not disappointed in me, are you?"

"Ah, um..." Susan seemed to struggle to find the right words to tell him, and the red on her face began to gradually darken the longer the others at her table stared at her. By the time she finally did speak, she looked like she wanted to disappear beneath her robes. "No?"

"Thanks, Sue," Harry said, completely ignoring the way his red-haired friend blushed at the nickname he had given her. He turned to look at the Tracey and Hannah. "See that, why can't you two be more magnanimous and sweet like her?"

While Susan's face began taking on the same glow as a red star, Tracey

quipped, "because if everyone was like Susan this world would be a very boring place." Realizing that what she said could be construed as an insult, the brunette quickly turned to the shy Hufflepuff and said, "not that there's anything wrong with being nice like you. Just that the world needs more... more..."

"Variety?" Lisa supplied when she saw Tracey struggling to find the right word.

"Yeah, that's it!" Tracey snapped her fingers as her face took on a 'eureka!' expression. "The world needs more variety, otherwise it would get very boring very fast."

"Such an eloquent speaker," Harry teased the girl for requiring someone else to come up with a proper noun for her to use. "You ever thought of becoming a politician?"

While Tracey huffed at him in mock indignation, Blaise gave him a calculating look.

"I think the only one who wants to become a politician is you."

Harry looked over at Blaise and sent the boy a wide smile.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"Right," Blaise drawled with an amused smirk.

"Not to put a rain on your guys' parade or anything," Neville interrupted, speaking for the first time since their bantering had begun. "But I think you might want to leave, Harry, or you may be late."

Harry blinked at Neville for several seconds, before looking out the nearest window. Where the sun had once been set low on the horizon, now it had risen so high up that he could no longer see it from his position near the window.

Eyes widening in horror, Harry waved his wand and cast the tempus charm. Glowing numbers arranged themselves in midair, showing him that it was almost ten o'clock.

"Dammit!" Harry hissed, swearing for the first time in a long time. He quickly grabbed his bag filled with notes he had written to help his friends and threw it over his shoulder. His hurried and jumbled, "Sorryaboutthisgottagobye!" was barely even heard much less understood by his friends as he bolted out of the library, much to Madam Pince's ire.

"Well," Tracey started as she stared at the spot her newest friend just vacated, blinking. "At least we now know that Mr. Perfect isn't quite so perfect."

Her words brought another round of snickers from the others. None of them would deny that it was amusing to watch the normally calm and composed Harry Potter making a mad and panicked dash out of the door like a man possessed.

Blaise summed up his thoughts quite nicely.

"It would definitely make good blackmail material, should we ever need it."

Tracey sent him an amused look while the others blinked, wondering if he would really blackmail his friend or if he was just joking.

"My, how Slytherin of you, Blaise."

Blaise smirked.

"I try."

XoX

Harry sped down the many halls of Hogwarts, cursing himself for having lost track of time. This had never happened before. Harry had always been a very punctual person. A part of having eidetic memory and quite possibly the worst case of OCD ever recorded was that his internal clock always knew what time it was. Always.

Well, that may be a bit of an exaggeration. He would sometimes lose track of time when he was with Lisa, but those were instances where he

was finished with everything and had nothing to do for the rest of the day except to spend time with his best friend, so it didn't matter. It was pretty much time he *allowed* to slip by him so it was alright.

This, nearly missing out on something he had been expecting for the past few weeks because he lost track of time, was not something he had expected or allowed.

Growling to himself, Harry put such thoughts out of his mind and tore down the stairs, taking them four, five, sometimes even six or seven at a time. He could feel his magic working through his legs as he used his unique ability to reinforce himself in order to counteract the possible damage he might receive for jumping several sets of stairs at once, as well as to speed up his pace.

He reached the bottom very quickly, and his feet had scarcely touched the floor when he pushed himself into another sprint.

Harry tore his way out of the Entrance Hall and zoomed across the grassy landscape of Hogwarts, making his way to the large Quidditch Pitch.

The Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch was large, nearly three times the size of a football field. Stands rose into the sky on all sides, each one decorated with the colors of one of the four Houses. Spectators sat in the low walls built in between the stands, while Harry assumed the teachers sat in the high stands for better viewing.

Lush green grass met his feet as he stepped out onto the field. Six large hoops, three on either side of the Pitch, loomed overhead.

Harry could see the crowd of those who were trying out had already gathered. He recognized all them thanks to his perfect memory. The Quidditch captain, he noted, was not there. Good. It meant he had made it in time.

A few of them stood out more than others, chief among them being the two Weasley twins, Fred and George Weasley. He also recognized Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet, both students in their third year. Angelina was an attractive witch with dark skin, black hair and brown

eyes, while Alicia had olive-colored skin and brown hair and eyes.

Amongst the others he could easily make out Katie Bell, an athletic looking and attractive second year witch with dirty blond hair and doe-like brown eyes. She often hung out with Angelina and Alicia. With her, he also recognized Cormac McLaggen, Carl Hopkins, David Norton, and Jason Swann, all second years looking to try out.

As Harry made his way towards the group, Fred and George Weasley spotted him from where they were huddled together, no doubt plotting something devious.

The pair grinned as soon as they saw him, and drew the eyes of the others towards them as they walked over to Harry.

"Well, if it isn't young Harrikins out for a stroll."

"Have you come to cheer us on during our try outs?"

Harry's lips twitched into an amused smile. He really was rather fond of the two trouble makers. In his mind, the Weasley twins were upholding his father's tradition of causing mischief around the school, something he could not do since it would ruin his sterling reputation as an upstanding and helpful student.

"Watch you guys try out?" Harry asked with a playful scoff. "Do you really think I would be here to cheer you two troublemakers on? No." He shook his head and adopted a pompous look. "I am here to try out for the Seeker position."

He had decided to try out ever since his first flying lesson had ended. During their free time, he and Tracey had taken to the sky, and while his Slytherin friend had simply flown loops at a leisurely pace, Harry had taken his desire for a thrill to the extreme. Having remembered the many stunts his father had shown him and spoken of, Harry had tried to emulate those maneuvers: dive bombing toward the ground before pulling up at the last minute, barrel rolls and gut turning loop-de-loops, skimming the grass while he was upside down before turning about at a sharp ninety degree angle without losing any speed. He had gotten so lost in what he'd been doing that he hadn't even realized the entire crowd

of first years and Madam Hooch gawking at him.

When he had finally come down, the flight instructor with hawk-like eyes had informed him that she had never seen such marvelous flying since his father, and that he should consider trying out for the school team next year.

Of course, Harry being Harry had decided to try out this year. Thus the reason he was now standing at the Quidditch Pitch with the other hopefuls.

There were two reasons Harry had decided to try out for the Gryffindor Quidditch. The first was because making the team would boost his reputation, and making the team as a first year would raise it even more so. There had never been a first year to gain entrance onto the House teams, as far as he knew, and definitely never one who had gained the position of Seeker, which was often the considered the most prestigious position. If he could become the Gryffindor Seeker in his first year, his standing amongst his peers would be raised even more, and he would be that much closer to stepping out of the shadow his title as the Boy-Who-Lived cast.

The second reason was much more personal, and in many ways, far more important to him. His father, James Potter, aside from his prodigious talents in Transfiguration and his knack for getting into trouble with pranks, had been one of the greatest Quidditch Players in the last century. He had been so good that by the time he graduated Hogwarts he'd had seven propositions by various Quidditch teams asking him to sign a contract with them as a Chaser.

Unfortunately, the war had still been going strong and his father's sense of justice led him to not accepting the positions. Instead he had joined the fight against Voldemort, which ultimately led to his parents demise.

Harry did not blame his dad for what had happened, or for the fact that his desire to fight against the Dark Lord led to Harry being raised by the Dursleys. Voldemort's campaign against wizarding Britain had been more of an extermination of all things non-magical and different, including those witches and wizards born from non-magical parents. That meant

his mother had been a target, and would have always been a target no matter if they had entered the war or not. Who knows what might have happened had they not decided to fight. Perhaps things would have happened differently and all three of them would have died in a Death Eater Raid.

"Trying out for the position of a Seeker?" questioned Fred, blinking.

"I do believe that is what he said, Gred."

"A first year?"

"Indeed, a first year."

"Isn't that against school rules?"

"I'm surprised you two are even concerned about whether it's allowed or not," Harry interrupted. "Considering neither of you are sterling examples of rule abiding students."

"Oooh, that hurts Harrikins, right here." George placed his hands over his heart and gave Harry a hurt look, as if the young raven haired youth had just stabbed him in the chest.

"I will have you know that my brother and I are the most upstanding young men you will ever meet."

"Indeed, we are perfect gentlemen."

"Right you are, dear brother of mine."

"I couldn't help but notice," Harry began with an amused eyebrow raised. "That neither of you said anything about being rule abiding."

The two twins looked at each other, then back at Harry.

"By golly, you're right! We didn't, did we?"

"Well, it's not as if we can say otherwise. Mischief makers we may be, but liars we are not."

"So," Fred swung his left arm around Harry's shoulder while George swung his right around Harry's other shoulder. "Our little firsty thinks he's got what it takes to make the team?"

"You know, it is quite difficult to make the team. Especially with our captain. He's very... driven when it comes to Quidditch."

"Obsessed is more like it."

"Indeed."

"I believe my skills will speak for themselves once I'm in the air," Harry informed them. He had complete confidence in his own abilities. He may have only flown on his own once—not counting the toy broom he had received from Sirius when he was one—but when he had been on that broom he had never felt more at least. It had felt like the broom was an extension of himself, rather than a piece of wood between his legs.

"You seem pretty confident," Angelina said as Harry, Fred and George stopped next to the other students waiting for the try outs. "Getting on the team isn't easy, and it will be even harder for you since you're a firsty."

"As I said, my skills will speak for themselves once we're in the air," Harry told her with a smile. "I don't believe we've met before." He stuck out his hand. "Harry Potter."

Angelina gave him an amused smile before sticking out her own hand.

"Angelina Johnson."

"A pleasure," Harry said as he took her hand in his grasp and laid a kiss on her knuckles.

"Such a gentlemen you are," Fred exclaimed.

"Would you kiss my hand too?" asked George, batting his eyelashes at Harry.

Before Harry could come up with a suitable retort, both Angelina and Alicia smacked the two in the back of the head.

"Oh, stop it, you two," Alicia drawled as the twins held the back of their heads in mock pain. "Honestly, can't you troublemakers ever be serious for once in your life?"

"My dear Alicia, who do you think you're talking to?"

"Of course we can't be serious. How would we manage our mischief if we were?"

Alicia gave a heavy sigh, as if she had heard that response a thousand times. Considering how practiced the act of smacking Fred had been for her, Harry would not be surprised if she had.

The olive-skinned girl turned to him and smiled as she held out her hand. "Alicia Spinnet," she introduced as Harry kissed the back of her hand as he had Angelina's.

"Charmed," Harry replied with a charming smile. He then turned to the last female of their group, who looked like she was hiding out behind Angelina. "And you are?"

Katie Bell flushed slightly, before shaking her head and smiling at him as she daintily held out her hand.

"Katie Bell, pleased to meet you."

"The pleasure's all mine," Harry returned with a smile as he repeated the gesture he had done for Angelina and Alicia. Katie blushed a bit and her smile seemed to widen.

Behind Harry, George leaned into Fred so he could whisper in his brother's ear.

"He's quite smooth, isn't he?"

"Indeed, I suspect we have a soon to be Casanova on our hands."

Harry felt like rolling his eyes as he heard the pair of troublemaker's words. Just because he was acting in the appropriate manner of an heir to an Ancient and Most Noble House did not mean he was some kind of

womanizer. He was nothing like the fops Lisa always read about in those trashy romance novels of hers. Honestly, it was as if they two had never heard of pureblood etiquette.

Then again, knowing who they were and what family they were born into, maybe they hadn't.

"So you think you have what it takes to make seeker?"

All eyes turned from Harry to the person who spoke. Cormac McLaggen stood before the younger man, arms crossed and a sneer on his face.

"As I have already informed everyone multiple times, I'll let my skills speak for themselves once I'm on a broom," Harry told the boy coolly. He knew very little about McLaggen, and what little he did know was from what he had observed thus far in the common room. Cormac was a braggart, pure and simple. He may have talent, but the fact that he would often brag about his own prodigious skills while showing none of them simply rubbed Harry the wrong way.

McLaggen grunted as he uncrossed his arms.

"We'll see if you can keep that confidence when the try-outs start."

As if summoned by the word 'try-outs,' the Quidditch team captain stalked onto the field, a broom slung over his shoulder and a heavy looking chest in one hand.

Captain Oliver Wood was a rather burly fifth year student with brown hair and eyes, and was of broad shoulders and chest. He was very tall, standing head and shoulders taller than Harry, and was one of those few wizards who actually looked like he exercised extensively. He had a very commanding presence about him, and there was a maniacal looking gleam in his eyes that several of the people there (Angelina, Alicia, Fred and George) shuddered at when they saw it.

"Alright you lot!" Oliver started as soon as he was on the pitch. "Try outs are starting now. Those who are trying out for the Beater position move over to the left side of the pitch. Chasers front and center, and Seekers over to the right."

Clearly, this was a man who had no desire for inane pleasantries or long-winded speeches. He was all business.

While Fred and George walked over to the left side of the pitch with Jason Swann, Angelina, Alicia, Katie, Carl Hopkins, and David Norton stayed where they were. Cormac McLaggen was the only other person besides Harry himself who walked over to the right where the Seekers were supposed to be.

"Oi! What's a firsty doing here?"

Harry turned at Oliver's shout and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm here to try-out," he informed the much older boy. Oliver frowned.

"First years aren't allowed on the teams. Sorry gent, but you'll have to leave. You can always try for a position next year."

Harry ignored the grins he was getting from Fred and George, as well as smug look he got from McLaggen and stared at the burly teen in front of him.

"Actually, there is no rule that says a first year can't be on the team," he corrected, causing Oliver to blink. "It only states that first years aren't allowed to bring their own brooms. People just assume a first year can't make the team because of it."

"Whatever the case is, I still can't let you on the team," Oliver said. "Not being allowed to bring your own broom is just as bad as not being allowed on the team. I don't know if you noticed, but the school brooms are the biggest pieces of shite I've ever seen. You're as likely to get killed trying to fly one as you are to stay in the air."

"Ah, but what if I told you that I have a sure fire plan that will allow me to use an extremely good broom without breaking any school rules?" asked Harry, smiling as he saw Oliver look at him like he had grown a second head.

"How can you use your own broom if you can't even bring it to school?"

"You let me worry about that," Harry told him. When he saw the Quidditch captain was not convinced he said, "let's just say I have a full proof plan that will allow me to use my broom without repercussions and leave it at that. All I'm asking for is the chance to get on the team. Let me try-out. If I'm not good enough than there's no harm done, right?" He could see Oliver was on the fence, and decided that one more push was needed. "Besides, if I can beat McLaggen over here using one of the school brooms, imagine what I could do on a broom that doesn't have the potential to be fatal every time you ride it."

That seemed to settle things for Oliver.

"Alright, you can try out," he told him reluctantly. "But if I don't think you've got what it takes, it's off the pitch with you. Got it?"

"Of course," Harry said smoothly, giving a serene smile at his accomplishment. Now all he had to do was prove his skills on a broom; an easy enough task to accomplish so long as McLaggen's talent as a braggart was not matched by his talent on a broom.

Quidditch try-outs started soon after. Harry was forced to listen to Cormac McLaggen brag about how he was going to beat Harry and get his rightful position on the team. Harry wished he could ignore the boy, and cursed his eidetic memory for burning this conversation—if the act of one person talking about his own greatness for the sole purpose of hearing himself talk while the other tried to ignore him could be considered a conversation—into his memory.

Thankfully, Harry had a lot of practice at pretending to ignore people, and so while he was not able to get the braggart's continued speaking out of his head, he was still able to focus on the rest of the try-outs.

He had never questioned that Fred and George Weasley would get the Beater positions. Aside from the fact that they were a two-for-one package as they worked quite flawlessly together, probably because they were twins, there was only one other person trying out for the beater position, and Jason Swann simply didn't have the extraordinary ability to work in perfect synchronicity with either of the twins that they had with each other.

Of those who tried out for Chasers, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet soon proved to be the obvious choices for two of the three spots available. From what he knew the pair had already been on last years team with Fred and George. They certainly showed a lot of talent and teamwork skills when their time came to show what they could do.

The other position as Chaser was given to Katie Bell. She was not as good as Angelina or Alicia, and technically speaking Carl Hopkin was better. However, while the pureblood student had more talent on a broom, Katie was more compatible and better able to work with the other two girls than he was. And in a position where teamwork meant everything, the ability to work with those you play alongside of is more important than your talent flying a broom.

After nearly two hours of watching the other students try-outs and listening to the incredibly long-winded McLaggen boasting about how he was going to beat Harry, the time finally came for the two going out for the Seeker position to put their skills to the test.

By now, all of the people who had been chosen to be on the team were near the stands so they could watch on and see who got the position, while those who lost had dejectedly made their way back to the common room.

Harry could see Fred and George talking with Angelina and Alicia while Katie watched on in obvious amusement. He wondered what the twins were doing. If they were anything like the Marauders, they were probably taking bets on which one of them would get the Seeker position, he reasoned.

"Alright you two, mount your brooms," Oliver instructed them as he knelt down next to the trunk he had brought. As Harry mounted his broom, he saw Oliver unlock a clasp that kept the tiniest of the balls used for Quidditch, the Snitch.

Quidditch was a sport that had three different types of balls that were kept in play. Bludgers, large leathery balls that would attack the players. It was the Beaters job to keep them away from the players on their team and, if possible, hit them at the players on the other team. The Quaffle,

which Harry likened to a football, was the object that the three Chasers focused on, and it was their job to get the Quaffle through one of the three hoops while the Keeper tried to keep the Quaffle from entering.

The snitch was the smallest of the three. It was a tiny golden ball smaller even than Harry's palm. On either side it possessed a pair of wings that fluttered and beat with speeds of a hummingbird. It was the job of the position he was going out for, the Seeker, to find and catch the snitch before the other team's Seeker did. Doing so would not only end the game, but gave the team whose Seeker caught it 150 points, which most often but not always won the game. This was why the Seeker's position was so important.

Beside Harry, Cormac McLaggen also mounted his broom, while Oliver looked at the pair with a disturbing maniacal gleam in his eyes.

"I'm going to release the snitch," Oliver informed them both, holding up the fluttering ball as it tried to squirm out of his grasp. "The one who catches the Snitch two out of three times will be the one who gets the Seeker position. You got that?"

"Of course," McLaggen said in a pompous voice. "Just save that position for me after I finish showing young Harry how a real Seeker plays."

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he focused on Oliver.

"I'm ready."

"Right." Oliver released the Snitch and let it fly off. He brought a whistle to his lips. "When I blow this whistle, you two are to start looking for the snitch. On my mark..."

Harry took a deep breath and let his body relax as he prepared to kick off. Beside him, Cormac McLaggen tightened his grip on the handle of his broom.

"Three..."

For a moment, Harry felt a small trickle of anxiety. What if he wasn't good enough? What if McLaggen really *was* better than him? What if he didn't

make the team? While he had decided to try out in order to boost his reputation, there was a big chance his reputation could be sullied. How bad would it look to his peers if he, a first year, went out for the Quidditch team and failed? He would look like an arrogant and presumptuous child who bit off more than he could chew, and it would make people question whether or not he was really everything they thought he was.

"Two..."

No! he couldn't think like that. Defeatist thinking always led to defeat. He couldn't let fear rule him. The first enemy to conquer if he wanted to succeed was fear, just like his master always told him, and he would rather give it his all and fail knowing he tried his best, then not even try because he was too afraid of failure.

"One..."

The whistle blew and Harry put everything except the task at hand out of his mind as he pushed off the ground. All of his worries, all of his hopes, all of his goals and desires faded, as if they were a dream. Right now, only one thing mattered: getting the Snitch before MgLaggen.

MgLaggen decided to take the high ground in his search for the Snitch. No doubt he hoped that the overhead view would allow him to find it more quickly than Harry. In most cases, that would probably work, but not against someone like Harry.

Using his unnaturally perceptive vision granted to him through his eidetic memory, Harry swerved along the pitch on his broom, memorizing everything he laid eyes. Any change taking place in between sweeps would be cataloged into his mind and referenced for future use at light speeds.

His eyes darted from left to right, up and down, while his head constantly turned and scanned the area. So long as the Snitch wasn't hiding behind one of the stands, he would see it.

There! He could see the Snitch hanging low to the ground near one of the student stands on the opposite side of the pitch. MgLaggen hadn't noticed it yet, he wasn't even looking in the right direction.

Harry felt a grin come to his face as his competitive side came to the fore. Wanting to snatch the Snitch before his opponent could even begin to guess what was happening, the raven-haired boy urged his broom towards the small golden ball with wings.

His broom felt sluggish under his grip, and Harry could feel it begin veering towards the left as he pushed it past its boundaries. Small bucks and jerks tried to rock it this way and that, but he kept a firm grip on the handle and let his magic flow through his fingers and into the wood. Slowly but surely, the spastic jerks ceased for the most part, with only a few relatively minor bucks that were easily quelled.

The Snitch was much closer now. It zoomed to the left and Harry tailed it doggedly. MgLaggen had only just realized that Harry was on the Snitch's tail and tried to coax his broom to zoom in on them so he could take the winged ball out from under Harry's nose.

His broom was much faster than Harry's. A Comet 290, one of the faster brooms out there. However, despite the speed advantage he had over Harry, he was too far away to catch up before Harry caught the Snitch.

"Excellent job, Potter!" Oliver said as Harry handed the small ball over to him with a grin. MgLaggen landed beside them, glaring at the younger year. It was a glare that went ignored by the other two. "You get it one more time and you're on the team. Better try harder if you want on with us, MgLaggen."

MgLaggen looked like he was about to burst a blood vessel his face was so red. Harry ignored him in favor of letting his eyesight fall upon a group of people who had come onto the pitch sometime before he caught the Snitch.

Blaise, Hannah, Lisa, Neville, Susan, Terry and Tracey had all come onto the Quidditch Pitch, probably to watch him, and huddled in a group with the Weasley Twins, who looked like they were trying to convince the first years to place their bets on who would be getting the Seeker position.

"Let's do this again." Oliver's voice caused Harry to look away from his friends and focus on the task at hand, getting the Snitch before MgLaggen.

The second time was not as easy as the first. The moment the whistle was blown, MgLaggen began tailing Harry, a not unexpected developing, considering what happened last time.

Harry did not try to look for the Snitch immediately. With MgLaggen following him around like a mouse on cheese, trying to find the Snitch would not be the wisest decision. The other boy's broom was faster. Even if Harry was more skilled, which was still an untested theory seeing as the last competition had been won due in no small part to luck, the difference between their brooms would outstrip any skill advantage.

Instead Harry took MgLaggen on a chase. He wove through the stands, rose into the air and dove towards the ground. All of it done in an effort to make MgLaggen confused and disoriented. Whether it worked or not, Harry didn't know. Turning his head to look behind him, he saw that MgLaggen was still tailing him and the older student's eyes were locked on him like the cross hairs of a fighter jet.

Well, it wasn't quite what he wanted, but this would still suit Harry's needs. So long as the boy was so focused on him that he didn't focus on the Snitch, that was all that mattered.

He found the Snitch in short order. It had only been five minutes since the ball was released, and it was flitting about near the hoops closest to him. MgLaggen hadn't noticed it, so focused was his attention on Harry.

That was good. Now all he needed to do was get near the Snitch without alerting MgLaggen that he had found the Snitch.

With a yank of his broom, Harry quickly ascended into the skies. MgLaggen followed without a hint of hesitation, making Harry smile. When they past the general altitude where the Snitch was, Harry turned his broom so it would move over the hoops.

Predictably, MgLaggen followed, still completely unaware of what Harry was doing. Good. Just a little more maneuvering and he would be in position to get the Snitch.

The Snitch was still near the spot he had originally seen it. The ball had only moved a bit. Now it was near the left hoop. As soon as Harry felt he

was close enough, he shove the broom down as hard as it could go, making a steep dive toward the Snitch.

It must have seen him, or sensed him, or however it was the Snitch could tell a player was near. As soon as Harry entered his dive, it took off in its own swift descent towards the ground.

Harry felt a growl escape his throat. His eyes narrowed as he laid himself nearly flat against the broom to decrease his wind resistance. He could feel the broom shuddering as he pushed it far beyond its normal limits and did what he could with his magic to keep it stable.

His vision narrowed in on the Snitch and everything else faded out of his mind. Now it was just him and the Snitch. It had not pulled out of its dive and was nearing the ground now and, despite the dangers present, Harry refused to move out of his dive either. He stuck on its tail like a magnet and refused to move away.

When the Snitch was just a few feet from the ground it pulled out of its dive, turning nearly ninety degrees exactly and began running parallel to the ground. It had not lost an ounce of momentum.

Harry jerked on the handle of his broom hard. His feet touched the grass and Harry flinched as his broom nearly flew out of control. It began shaking so erratically that he was almost sure it would simply fall apart on him. And yet, he refused to let that stop him. Not now. Not when he was so close.

The Snitch was almost right next to him now. Just a few feet away, feet that was beginning to disappear as he closed in on it.

Three feet.

He felt the broom's shuddering as he picked up speed. It wasn't going to last much longer.

Two feet.

His hands gripping the brooms handle for all it was worth, Harry narrowed his eyes and focused on the Snitch.

One foot.

Keeping a firm grip on the broom with his left hand, Harry stretched his right hand out in preparation to grab the Snitch. He was close. So close. Just a few more inches. He stretched his arm further and could feel the Snitch grazing the tips of his fingers. He was—

—Harry's eyes widened as he felt the broom getting yanked out from under him and, suddenly, there was no longer any broom underneath him and he found himself airborne. He flew across the pitch but was losing altitude. Lower and lower he descended and Harry, his body and magic acting on nothing more than instinct, flung his left hand out towards the ground.

His magic came forth, cushioning him as much as it was able. It wasn't as much as he would have liked. He hit the ground arm first, then rolled end over end for several feet before stopping in a painful manner, lying on his back, gasping for air as all the oxygen was driven from his lungs.

Harry had no idea how long he laid there. His vision was blurry and there was a ringing in his ears. It could have been minutes, or it could have only been seconds. Eventually, his eyes snapped back into focus, the ringing stopped, and he became aware of the sound of rushing feet and his name being frantically called by several people.

"Harry!"

The first one to reach him was Susan Bones. The red-haired Hufflepuff looked close to tears as she knelt down next to him. She looked frantic.

"Harry! Are you ok!? Where does it hurt!?"

Harry didn't get a chance to answer, because in that moment, the rest of his friends reached him, and all of them began asking more or less the same series of questions, just worded differently by each person.

A moment of guilt passed through him as he saw that all of his female friends looked like they were on the verge of tears. Tracey was the only one who had any modicum of control, and even her eyes were beginning to water at the corners. He felt awful, like he had done something wrong,

like their tears were his fault. Yet at the same time he felt... happy? Yes, he supposed that was the proper word for it. He felt happy that they were worried about him so much that they would cry for him. Happy and cared for.

He tried to suppress these feelings. Neither of them would do any good right now. Not the guilt, and not the elation.

Everyone around him was still talking, asking him if he was alright, but it all sounded like jumbled background noise that his currently addled mind couldn't make sense of. There was a pounding in his skull like that of a war drum being beaten by a troll. He must have hit his head as well, he concluded. Only when he had a concussion from one too many knocks in the skull did he have trouble understanding others.

He didn't worry about that though. Later tonight he could sort through his memories and fix them up so he could understand the separate words everyone was saying. For now, he needed to focus on calming his friends down.

"I'm fine," Harry told everyone, holding up his hand so he could get them to stop talking. It took a while, but the noise died down to a more manageable level. When he felt he would be heard over his friends, he asked, "what happened?"

"That jerk MgLaggen is what happened!" Tracey said with a scowl from where she knelt on his left. Harry looked at her and she gestured to where MgLaggen was currently surrounded by Oliver and the three Chasers. Fred and George were off to the side, but they did not look particularly pleased either. They were all yelling at the second year, but were so far away he couldn't hear what they were saying. "The ponce had the gall to grab the bristles of your broom and yanked it out from under you." Her scowl darkened. "He's so lucky the others are berating him or I would have shown him some of the hexes Daphne's been teaching me."

While the comment about Daphne was interesting, Harry decided to focus on something else. Namely, what he should do with MgLaggen.

He looked over at the boy cowering under the glare of the three Chasers

as they told him off for what he'd done. Harry pondered, what kind of punishment did he deserve? If he had anything to say about it, the other boy would be shunned before the day was out.

That was actually a very harsh punishment to deal with, being forsaken by all your friends, or previous friends. And for someone like McGraggen, who was a blow hard that loved bragging to others, that might be the worst punishment. The best part was, Harry wouldn't have to actually lift a finger to do it. Other people would punish the boy for him.

Deciding to assess the damage he had taken, Harry ran a quick mental check of all his injuries. He had a minor concussion, nothing too serious. Some bruising around his back and chest. Those weren't bad either, and would be easy to deal with. The only serious injury he could see was his wrist. It was broken—a hairline fracture, from what he could tell. He'd had enough of those to know how they felt, and by running his magic along the damaged bone, could feel the cracked line that ran about an inch long near the center of his wrist. That one would take a bit of effort to fix, but a good night directing his magic to the wound would heal it easily enough.

"Are you alright, Harry?" asked Susan. She seemed to have gotten over her embarrassment around him, at least temporarily, and checked him for injuries like an over-worried mother.

"I'm fine," he assured the girl. "Or I will be after a good nights rest."

"Oi, Potter!" Harry and those gathered around him looked up to see Oliver and the rest of the Quidditch team heading towards him. A quick glance showed Cormac McGraggen sulking as he made his way back to the Gryffindor Tower. "You're not dead, are you? Cuz we still need to see how well you do, and since Cormac isn't getting on the team, I need you to catch that Snitch."

Scowls made their way onto the faces of his friends, even sweet and innocent Susan Bones looked like she wanted to snap at the older boy. Fortunately, none of them would have to. Angelina did it for them by smacking Oliver on the back of the head.

"I mean, erm, why don't we get you to the hospital," Oliver amended as

he rubbed his abused noggin.

"There's no need to send me to the hospital," Harry said as he gingerly climbed to his feet. He swayed a bit as he stood to his full height, but Neville came up and put a hand on his shoulder to steady him. He gave the other boy a nod of thanks, then turned back to Oliver. "More importantly, I have something for you."

He held out his hand toward the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain. There, resting in the center of his palm was a small, golden Snitch.

Alright, longest chapter so far. I would like to thank you guys who left a review. Much as we fanfic authors deny it, having people review our stories are what keeps us posting new chapters. It's the whole reason this chapter got out so quickly.

That being said, while I love the reviews, even though who are critical of my work, I would like to ask that if you are going to be critical, could you please provide me with information on how I can fix whatever you feel is wrong with my story? Telling me what I am doing wrong is all well and good, but if I knew how to fix it, I would have done so before posting my chapters.

Well, that's all for the today. I don't know when the next chapter will be, but I'll try and get it out for you guys soon.

Syanora!

Halloween Nightmare

Halloween Nightmare

I don't know when it happened, that moment I stopped considering Lisa to be an annoyance. I sat at my desk, not paying attention to my teacher's lecture, pondering, trying to discern the moment Lisa became my... friend. Yes, that was the word. I failed, unfortunately. I couldn't pinpoint any specific incident when I began to think of her as something more, something important. All I know is that it happened.

When the bell rang and class ended, I left the room with the other students. Many some goodbye to me; some did not. I didn't particularly care, but for the sake of being polite, said goodbye back.

Lisa was waiting for me outside.

"Hey, Harry!" She greeted me with undiminished enthusiasm. I tried hard not to smile.

"Lisa, how was class?"

"Boring!" She sang.

"Ha... boring, you say?"

"Really boring," she confirmed.

As we began our walk to the school entrance, I tried convincing the girl about the importance of education. I feel like most of my words flew over her head. That, or she just wasn't paying attention. Either way, she didn't seem to understand why learning and school was so important.

"So, Harry," Lisa said as we walked outside, the bright sun bearing down on us from the clear sky overhead.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering." Lisa wasn't looking at me anymore. She twirled a strand of hair between her fingers, looking away. I frowned. "Would you be interested in having dinner with my family this Saturday?"

I blinked.

"Dinner?"

"Mm."

She nodded, still not looking in my direction. I thought her offer and, well, I couldn't see any reason not to accept her invite. Dinner with Lisa sounded infinitely more pleasant than dinner with the Dursleys. Still, a part of me felt reluctant. Hadn't I been avoiding making friends because I would be going to Hogwarts when I turned 11? Why form bonds when they would eventually break? Better to not befriend anyone than become friends and leave them later on. Those were my thoughts.

And yet, as I looked at Lisa, I wondered. Would it really be so bad? Surely, I could allow myself to befriend at least one person. I'll admit, books were nice, but I still felt lonely. Even sparring at the dojo didn't change this. I felt isolated, alone, much like when I lived in that broom cupboard underneath the stairs.

I'll also admit, if only to myself, that I did actually like Lisa. She was bright and cheerful, a ray of sunshine breaking through clouds of monotonous gray; a breath of fresh air, refreshing and crisp, blowing away the staleness that had become my life. That was Lisa Crawft.

"Sure," I agreed, and the cheerful expression on Lisa's face let me know that I made the right decision.

XoX

News of Harry becoming the new Seeker for the Gryffindor Quidditch team spread quickly. The very day after try-outs in fact. It seemed the Hogwarts rumor mill had been working overtime with anything concerning him. Harry had once more been the subject of much talk among the student population, and even more gawking than he had been subject to before.

This didn't bother Harry like it had back when school first started and people gawked at him like he was some circus freak show. At the beginning of school, when everyone stared at him, it had been annoying. Now he actually enjoyed them, because unlike before, the stares and admiring glances and envious looks he received were because of something he did; something he had accomplished with his own skills and abilities; not because of something that happened to him when he was a helpless baby.

He would admit it felt nice to have people looking at him with so much respect. To listen to students talking in the hall about how Harry Potter, not the Boy-Who-Lived, but Harry Potter made the Gryffindor team as its Seeker.

Acknowledgment. He was finally being acknowledged as his own person. He still had a long ways to go before the stigma of that thrice damned title disappeared, but he was making inroads towards that goal.

The only real problem that came from his joining of the Quidditch team, as far as he could see, was the jealousy that came with the news. While many people were in awe of him and looked at him with admiration and respect, just as many were jealous of his accomplishment. Several times while he walking through the hallway, he would hear people talking about how how they could have done better if they decided to try out for their teams. Draco Malfoy had been particularly loud and obnoxious whenever he discussed how unfair it was that Harry had been made Seeker when he could have done so if he had realized it was allowed.

That was not the worst of the dissension, however. No, while the people boasting about how they could have made the team if they tried, and put him down by claiming he had only gotten on the team due to his fame because they were jealous bothered him, they were easily ignored. He would simply show them how wrong they were during his first game and that would be that. By far, the worse rumor was the one about how the staff was showing him favoritism by letting him join the Quidditch team.

These rumors had no basis in fact. Professor McGonagall had actually been against letting him join the team at first, stating that it was against the rules. And when Harry told her there was no rule claiming he was not

allowed to join, she told him it didn't matter because he could not bring a broom to Hogwarts. It was only after a demonstration of his skills and his promise that he had a plan that would let him use a broom better than the ones Hogwarts possessed without actually bringing his own (funny because he doesn't have a broom) broom to school that she finally relented. No one else knew this, however; only his friends and his new teammates were aware of these circumstances, and so rumor persisted.

He almost chuckled when he thought of how upset Oliver was when news of Harry's position as the team's Seeker came to light the next day. The man seemed to have been hoping to keep it a secret until the first game. But of course, that would have been impossible since there were several people who saw him trying out that day.

According to rumor, one Cormac McLaggen had been seen in the Gryffindor Common Room telling people about how unfair it was that a first year became Seeker because of his fame, when someone who was obviously more talented (like him) had been denied. Harry did not know if there was any veracity to those rumors, seeing as how he was rarely in the Gryffindor Common Room, since he preferred to spend time either with his friends or one of the empty classrooms on the second floor practicing magic, but when he took into account how much of a braggart McLaggen was it made sense. He did not doubt for an instant that the boy would say something like that in order to lessen the sting on his pride.

Truly, his decision to become Gryffindor Seeker was a double-edged sword.

With a small sigh, Harry put his thoughts on his decision to join the House Quidditch team on hold and looked at the letter he was writing. He was sitting in one of the squishy arm chairs next to the fire place. A merry fire crackled before him, its flames a mixture of yellows and reds that danced around each other like a pair of star-crossed lovers. Harry blamed his euphemism on Lisa's trashy novels and absently wondered if the fire was charmed.

He reread the letter for errors and to make sure it contained all of the legalese and details requires, his calligraphy pen tapping a steady rhythm

on the coffee table. It was a letter to Andromeda Tonks, a very important one that could help him exponentially in his goals, and the wording needed to be just right so she would know exactly what he wanted. After several rereads, Harry decided it was perfect.

As if knowing his letter was finished, Hedwig came swooping in through the window he had opened before starting on the letter. She flew down and landed on the coffee table next, her amber eyes going from him, to the letter, then back to him.

"So impatient," Harry teased with a small grin. "I haven't even sealed the letter yet and you're already demanding I attach it for delivery."

Hedwig gave him an indignant hoot as her wings flapped and her eyes bore into his.

"Yes, I did call for you," Harry agreed with a nod. "I just didn't expect you to get here so fast. If you had been in the owlery, it would have taken at least two minutes for you to fly up here. It's almost like you've been waiting outside this whole time." Which she had. Harry had heard the flapping of wings while he wrote the letter and had been able to feel her impatience the entire time he checked it over.

Hedwig barked at him, her feathers ruffling as she gave him a glare worthy of Professor McGonagall.

"Don't look at me like that," Harry said, still grinning at his owl. "You have got to be the most impatient bird I've ever seen." Hedwig tried to bite his finger at that, but he moved it out of the way and ran his fingers along the feathers at the back of her head. "But don't worry, you're still the best, most beautiful and most intelligent owl I know."

Hedwig tried to give him an angry hoot, but it sounded more like a very happy and very un-owl-like trill.

"Now, just let me seal this, then I can have you take it to Andromeda, alright?"

Hedwig gave him an affirmative hoot/trill, and Harry stopped stroking her head to grab the envelope next to the letter.

He carefully placed the letter in the envelope, then sealed it using the spell he had been taught by the recipient of the letter. The spell conjured a blob of melted wax that attached to the closed envelope and soon took the form of the Potter Crest: a coat of arms shaped like a roman kite shield with a Griffin being enveloped by the wings of a Phoenix in the center. Below the shield was the family motto: *Audentes Fortuna Iuvat*, Fortune Favors the Bold.

The moment Harry sealed the letter, Hedwig stuck her leg out, making it quite clear what she wanted. Harry withheld a chuckle as he attached the letter to her leg. It was amusing to see the owl getting so impatient, but then, that was Hedwig for you.

"Be safe," Harry said as he finished tying the letter to Hedwig's leg. The snowy owl gave a soft hoot, nipped his finger, then took off, flying out of the very window she had used to enter.

Harry looked out of the window for a second, wondering what he should do while waiting for Neville and everyone else to wake up. Perhaps he could read a good book...

XoX

Time passed and Harry found himself becoming extremely busy. Between spending time with his friends, working in class, his own private studies and now the new and insane Quidditch practice developed by Oliver Wood, Harry had discovered that despite only catching four hours of sleep each day, he was having difficulty keeping up with everything.

The biggest problem, Harry thought, was most definitely the new Quidditch practice that Oliver was putting him and the rest of the team through. The man was truly fanatical when it came to the sport, even more so than Tracey! Only now, after having suffered under the man's tutelage, did Harry realize what those shudders Fred, George, Angelina, and Alicia had given meant when they saw that maniacal gleam in the Gryffindor Quidditch captain's eyes.

Quidditch practice was always held five times a week and was always first thing in the morning at five o'clock sharp. Harry was very glad he woke up earlier than that because he had seen, or rather heard, Oliver's

wake up call for the other members of their team and it was not pleasant in the least.

Oliver was a very hard task master when it came to training. The training sessions lasted from five o'clock to seven, two hours of what the other members described as the most hellacious torture they had ever endured. Harry didn't think it was torture, but he would admit that most normal people would never dare to think of doing some of the things Oliver had them do.

One of Oliver's favorite mottos seemed to be 'a strong body equals a strong player,' because for the first hour of their training it was all physical work outs. Running laps around the Quidditch Pitch, push ups, sit ups, squats, crunches, you name it, Oliver would most likely have them do it. During these times the only two people who did not suffer from exhaustion was Oliver himself, who did nearly twice as much as everyone else, and Harry who, while not in good of shape as Oliver, was still able to complete all the exercises and then some.

Oliver had never been so happy to find someone who believed in exercise just as much as he did that he nearly cried. It had actually been kind of frightening.

The last hour was always a mix of things. Sometimes they would have a strategy session, others they would practice Quidditch Plays.

This was the hardest part for Harry. Despite being a good athlete and in great shape, he had never played Quidditch before. It wasn't like football where you only had to watch one ball, the other players, and make sure the ball got into your opponents goal while making sure to keep it away from your own goal. There was so much more involved in the sport. The Chasers had to constantly keep an eye out for the Bludgers, the other players, the Quaffle, and the goal posts while trying to score a point by getting the Quaffle into their opponent's post. Meanwhile, the Beaters had to keep the Bludgers away from their Chasers and Seeker, while also trying to break up the plays of the other team by sending the Bludgers at them. It wasn't as hard as the Chaser position, but it still took quite a bit of work.

The Seeker, in some ways, had the easiest job. All they had to do was find and capture the Snitch before the other team's Seeker did. Once that happened it was almost guaranteed that that team who caught the Snitch would win, provided the other team didn't have a 160 point lead.

Of course, all that became irrelevant when Harry had scowled at Oliver and told him they would be making plays that involved him working with the Chasers, as well as helping the Beaters break up the other teams plays. The two of them had argued about it for some time, Oliver being of the belief that Harry should focus on finding the Snitch, and Harry believing he should help the team until the Snitch presented itself to him.

Granted, Oliver didn't know about Harry's memory advantage so he didn't know that Harry would spot the snitch so long as it was not hiding, and if it was hiding it wouldn't matter anyways because the other player wouldn't find it either. In the end, Oliver had only agreed after Harry had shown him consecutively that he could still find the Snitch quickly while helping the Chasers and Beaters through their practice matches.

As the days moved along October 1st soon changed into October 31st, Halloween Day and the day Harry Potter lost both of his parents exactly 11 years ago.

XoX

The school had gone all out to decorate the Great Hall. Orange and black streamers hovered above the permanently charmed ceiling, swaying in an undetectable breeze. Large pumpkins with jack-o-lantern carvings were on display around the room and on the five tables. Bats flew through the hair, ducking and weaving around banners. pumpkins, and the people sitting at the tables laughing and chatting merrily away. The entire place held an air of festivity.

And that was to say nothing about the food. Ham, Turkey, Chicken, Yams, bread rolls, mash potatoes, and all kinds of condiments sat on golden plates arrayed around the pumpkin decorations; all of it charmed orange and black to keep with the Halloween theme.

Yet Susan Bones was not smiling. She and her best friend, Hannah Abbott, had been looking around the large room for Harry Potter, but

couldn't find the raven-haired boy anywhere. She could see Neville sitting alone at the Hufflepuff table, the seats around him unoccupied as most people knew by now that when one of them was sitting there they were reserved for the rest of their friends, but Harry Potter, who always walked into the Great Hall with Neville during meals, was not present.

"Come on, Sue," Hannah said, grabbing her friend's arm and pulling her along to the table. "Maybe Neville knows where he is."

Susan nodded noncommittally as she let her friend drag her to the Hufflepuff table. Her eyes strayed to the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables, and noted that Harry wasn't sitting at those tables either. Wanting to be thorough but not really expecting to see him, she looked at the Slytherin table as well.

As she thought, he was not there either, though she did see Blaise and Tracey sitting next to Daphne Greengrass. The two Slytherin students had yet to sit with them during meals, but Susan figured it was because they didn't want their blond friend to feel left out. Susan admired their loyalty.

Soon enough, she and Hannah were sitting next to Neville. Hannah had chosen to sit on the boy's left while she sat on Hannah's left.

"Hullo, Neville," Hannah greeted in her usual friendly manner. Neville, who had been playing with his food looked up at her, his eyes unfocused. He blinked for a few seconds before seeming to realize who had spoken to him and smiled.

"Hullo, Hannah," he greeted, his tone only slightly distant.

"Is something wrong?" asked Susan, some of the worry she felt leaking into her voice. Did Neville know the reason Harry was not there? It would make sense if he did. Neville was in Harry's house, after all.

"Not really," Neville said after a moment. "Just thinking?"

"About what?" asked Hannah.

"Stuff."

It was a very vague answer. Not at all like Neville.

They wanted to ask him about it, but before they could, Lisa and Terry both arrived on the scene. They sat down on the opposite side of the two Hufflepuffs and one Gryffindor. After exchanging more greetings with each other, Terry began piling food onto his plate, while Lisa looked around with a small frown.

"Hey, Neville," she started, her pink lips turning downwards. "Where's Harry?"

"He's not coming."

"What?" Susan blinked at the strange statement. "What do you mean he's not coming? You mean he's not coming to feast?"

"Yes."

The single word answer shocked Susan, and her other friends from the looks of it. Harry didn't want to celebrate Halloween with them? Why?

Almost immediately, her mind began working on trying to discern the reason. He could be sick, but no, Harry seemed pretty healthy, and wizards almost never get sick unless it was a magical sickness, and they would know if he had gotten one of those sicknesses, there would be symptoms.

Perhaps something was depressing him. He hadn't seemed particularly sad the last time they had spoken, but then, it was very hard for her to figure out what Harry was feeling. He could be on the verge of tears and she doubted anyone would ever know.

There were dozens of possible reasons why Harry might not be up for celebrating Halloween, and not one of them seemed like the right reason. Each one seemed just as unlikely as the last. Without having any information, Susan couldn't even begin to guess why Harry didn't want to join them.

"Wait," Terry started, a frown on his face. "Why isn't Harry coming to the feast?"

Susan was startled to see the blank look that crossed Neville's face. It was the first time he had ever looked at someone like they'd just said something stupid.

"What day is today?" he asked, his tone almost sounding conversational but carrying a hint of something Susan couldn't identify.

Terry couldn't identify it either, because a strange look crossed his face. "Halloween?" he asked, sounding almost unsure of himself as he answered.

"Yes, Halloween," Neville said with a nod. "And do you know why we celebrate Halloween?"

"Well, it's all Hallows Eve, right?" Lisa said, frowning as she, too, wondered where this was going. Susan couldn't blame her. She wondered the same thing. "It's the festival of the dead, where we celebrate those who have passed on and the ancient traditions and rituals many wizards of old used to perform that have been lost to the ages."

"Yes, there is that," Neville agreed. "But there is another event that happened on this day much more recently that we celebrate."

Eyes widened in realization as they realized where this was going.

"It's the day You-Know-Who was defeated!" Hannah exclaimed excitedly.

"Yes, the day You-Know-Who was defeated," Neville said, his nod still in place. Susan frowned when she saw the look on his face. It was not the kind of happy look she would have expected from someone celebrating such an important day. She found out the reason a moment later. "The day Harry Potter defeated You-Know-Who, the day he became the Boy-Who-Lived. Did any of you stop to think about why he gained that title?"

"Well, because he stopped You-Know-Who, right?" asked Hannah, now sounding confused and a trifle uneasy. Susan was beginning to feel the same way. She couldn't help but feel there was something she was forgetting. "I mean, that's what Dumbledore said. That he stopped the killing curse You-Know-Who sent at him as a baby and caused the man's

downfall."

"And all it cost him to do so were his parents."

Silence. Despite the amount of jubilant noise around them, the four who sat with Neville were completely silent as the realization of why Harry was absent sunk in. After all, who would want to celebrate the day their parents died?

Susan felt horrible. Here she was, thinking about how much fun she was going to have on Halloween and what she would be eating at the feast, and Harry Potter was thinking about how his parents had been killed on that same day. How could she be such an awful friend?

The others didn't look like they were doing any better. Lisa and Hannah had a hand to their mouths, and Susan could see unshed tears in their eyes. Terry looked like he was about to be sick, his plate pushed aside as he lost his appetite.

It was so easy to forget that the reason Harry Potter's title as the Boy-Who-Lived came about because his parents had died and he had not. Aside from that one time she and Hannah first met him on the train, Harry never spoke of his parent's deaths, never mentioned that it might still bother him. But then, that was only natural right? Who would want to think about how their parents were killed?

"It's very easy for people to forget what Harry lost that day," Neville continued in a quiet tone, and Susan couldn't help but feel there was something in his voice that said he could relate to Harry in ways the others couldn't. "We only ever think about the peace we were granted because of what happened to Harry, and how famous he's for surviving the killing curse. We never remember that on that day, Harry lost both of his parents when he was only one year old."

"Do you think..." Susan started, only to stop and wipe at the tears in her eyes. She felt a sense of indefinable guilt and sadness settle upon her. Halloween would never be the same for her now that she realized how horrible it must be for Harry. "Do you think we should go find him? You know, to let him know we're here for him?"

"No," Neville said surely. "Harry informed me before I left for the feast that he wanted to be alone. Besides, I doubt we'd find him before curfew."

"Wouldn't he be in the library?" asked Lisa. "That's one of his favorite spots."

"I doubt it. It would be too easy for someone to find him if he went there. More than likely, Harry's somewhere wandering through the halls. There are so many of those in Hogwarts that it would take hours to search them all."

"I guess you're right," Hannah said, her shoulders slumping. She looked as defeated as Susan felt. Was she feeling the same guilt currently racking Susan's mind?

Just then, the large doors to the Great Hall burst open and in came Professor Quarrel. The man was a mess. His robes were dirty and frayed and ripped, and his turban sat askew on his head. His eyes were wide and frightened, flickering back and forth, as if seeing some unknown horror only he could see. He looked like he had seen a ghost.

"TROLL IN THE DUNGEON!"

Or a troll.

With those words pandemonium soon broke out as students started screaming and yelling and talking all at once, a threnody of voices shouting in a symphony of fear. Susan noticed that all of her friends were pale, probably wondering the same thing she was. How could a troll get into the school? Hogwarts was protected by a number of powerful enchantments. While Susan didn't know what any of those enchantments were, she could only assume there was something to keep trolls out. It seemed that wasn't the case.

Professor Quirrel fainted in a dead fright, falling to the ground face first while the other Professors tried to restore order. Albus Dumbledore stood to his feet, the twinkle in his eyes gone as he pulled out his wand and thrust it into the air.

There was a loud 'bang!' like the sound of a muggle canon being fired.

The silence became so deafening afterward that it almost seemed as if time had come to a standstill.

"There is no need for alarm or panic," Professor Dumbledore began in a calm tone. "I want all prefects to lead their Houses to their dormitories immediately. The professors and I will go down and deal with the troll."

There was a mad scramble as prefects tried to take control of the students. The teachers were all leaving, no doubt going to deal with the troll before it could run across any of the students. It was only as she stood up to go over to her prefect that she remembered something that caused dread to well up inside of her.

She whirled on her friends.

"Harry doesn't know about the troll."

One look at the others made her realize they had a similar thought. All of them were just as terrified at the thought as her. Susan felt like she was going to be sick.

This, she concluded, as fear for her friend settled in her gut, was the worst Halloween ever.

Harry waved his wand over the teapot sitting on the table. The teapot gave a brief shudder, then it began to change. Its form melted, flowing like liquid metal until it became an amorphous blob. Then that changed shape as well, six points protruded out of it to form four legs, a head, and a tail. The center began to flatten while the top maintained its somewhat dome-like shape.

Details began becoming clearer. Sharper. More defined. Bumpy ridges formed along what now looked like a shell. The skin along its legs became hard, rough, and gained a scaly appearance. Large toes with thick, pointed toenails formed at the ends. The head became sharper. A mouth formed along with a set of eyes and pronounced brow ridges. The skin became rough and leathery, while several wrinkles took shape under an elongated neck. Finally, a small, stubby tail began protruding from the other end of the shell.

Then it began to change color, going from the boring coppery color of the teapot to more earthy tones, grays and browns for the skin, and rusty greens and yellows for the shell. He added a few scratch marks onto the shell to give it a worn, used look for good measure. Sighing deeply, he finished the transfiguration with a flourish.

The whole process had taken close to five minutes. A lot longer than any of his other transfigurations had taken so far. Then again, this was third year course material, so perhaps he shouldn't be too surprised.

Wanting to see how good of a job he had done, Harry walked around the tortoise, inspecting it for any imperfections. It was a tad disconcerting how the tortoise's head moved along to follow him, its neck craning to keep its creator in sight, but he did his best to ignore the action in favor of his inspection.

It wasn't bad for a first attempt, Harry thought to himself, but it could use some improvements. The feet were malformed. He could see small areas that still looked like the metal along its shell. And while the head was shaped well enough, its brow ridges were too large. Not perfect, but he would improve with practice.

He also needed to work on the amount of time it took. He remembered when Professor McGonagall had turned her desk into a pig. The whole transfiguration had only taken a second. If he wanted to get that good, he would need to practice.

Waving his wand over the tortoise again, he undid the transfiguration and watched silently as it changed back into a teapot. At least his skills and untransfiguring objects and animals was getting a lot better.

Giving thoughts to his growing transfiguration skills, Harry had to admit that he was pleased with the progress he'd made. It had only been a month since he started and already he was doing third year transfiguration spells. Right now he was working on medium scale organic to inorganic, and inorganic to organic transfigurations. Changing medium sized animals to medium sized objects and visa versa. It was hard work, requiring both a lot of power and a lot of concentration, which was the reason transfiguration was such a difficult subject. It required a

lot more concentration than Charms did.

It probably had something to do with how dangerous transfiguration was, he theorized. With Charms there wasn't much of a chance of something blowing up in your face unless your name was Seamus Finnegan. If you didn't do a Charm correctly it simply wouldn't work. On the other hand, transfigurations had the habit of turning deadly if done incorrectly. Granted, right now he wasn't doing anything potentially lethal yet, but once he got into human transfiguration things would get difficult.

There was also the fact that when transfiguring an object you needed to know what you wanted to change. With Charms you simply imagined what you wanted to happen, waved your wand with the correct movements, canted the incantation and it would work so long as you did everything correctly. When transfiguring it took more than just a basic imagination, wand waving and chanting. You had to see what you wanted to change in your mind, watch as the teapot transformed into the tortoise, or the rabbit change into the slippers. The more detailed the image in your mind, the better your transfiguration would be in real life.

A loud gurgling sound issued from his stomach and distracted Harry from his thoughts. A frown crossed his face and he looked down as more gurgling came forth, followed by mild hunger pains. He had eaten just a little under an hour ago. The fact that he was hungry again said a lot about how much energy he had expended while practicing.

With a sigh, Harry took one look around the classroom he had decided to use for his private studies. It was no different from any other classrooms. There were desks arrayed around the room, shelves that lined the walls, a chalkboard, and a teachers desk. But the room looked more worn than the others currently being used. Harry could see the dust on the desks, a layer of it several centimeters thick. This place had obviously not been used before he found it for a long time.

He shook his head. There were so many unused classrooms like this. He wondered how long it had been since these rooms had a class in them. Were they no longer in use because the wizarding world had less students now? He knew that during the war against Voldemort a number of magical families had been killed. He just hadn't expected it to have

affected classes like this.

Deciding he to the kitchens to satisfy his hunger, as he had no desire to go to the Halloween Feast, Harry left the room behind.

He walked down one of the many corridors on the second floor, passing by suits of armor, some bowing, others saluting, one even flipped him off.

Along with the suits of armor, Harry saw several portraits. They lined either side of the wall and he could see the people moving within the landscapes.

For a second, Harry entertained the idea of using the portraits to create a spy network to let him know what was going on in the castle. With the people within the portraits ability to move from one painting to the next and communicate with each other, the potential to have a spy network that expanded the entire school of Hogwarts was incredible. And the best part was that no one would be the wiser. Magical children tended to ignore the portraits as they had seen them there whole life, and while children of non-magical families were in awe of them the first few days, the novelty eventually wore off for them as well. No one would ever suspect that the old hag you passed by in a painting could very well be watching your every move and reporting it back to someone.

Of course, the potential for a spy network was only useful so long as no one else had thought of it. Harry did not doubt for one second that Dumbledore must have done so. He had to have. If the man had even an ounce of the intelligence and wisdom lauded to him, then he would have. And if he had, then he would be alerted to the fact that Harry was trying to form a spy network with the paintings as well, should he make an attempt.

The thought of using the network of paintings and portraits as spies was only a passing thought in the mind of Harry Potter. Potentially useful, but not worth the risks. He put it out of his mind a second later.

It was just as Harry let the last remaining vestige of his previous thoughts fade that a loud, shrill scream pierced the air. It was a sound that came from someone experiencing fear, a primal terror of someones deepest, darkest fears.

He also recognized the voice. It was several decibels higher than normal, and loud enough to rattle glass, but even with that change Harry's eidetic memory easily took the voice's pitch and tone, and reference it with the hundreds of other voices he had heard in his life to find a match.

It was Hermione Granger.

And she was screaming in fear.

The sounds of her scream were cut off and quickly followed by a loud bellowing that Harry had never heard before in his life. It didn't sound the least bit human. The roar was also followed by something else: the sound of something shattering and another shrill scream.

By the time Harry's mind caught up with the rest of his body, he realized that his legs were already taking him to the screams. He ran down the hall, turned a corner, cut down another hall, then turned left at the end. The scream sounded again, followed by a roar, followed by more shattering, and Harry soon stood in front of the girl's bathroom. The door was open.

Harry didn't even slow down as he bodily flew toward the entrance, running into the room without hesitation, only to skid to a stop at the sight before him.

The scene was not a pleasant one. The entire bathroom looked like a hurricane had swept through it, then a tornado decided to join in on the fun for good measure. All around the room lay broken and scattered pieces of toilets, stall doors, and chunks of twisted metal that looked like a giant had chewed them up, then spat them back out when he found their taste to be unpleasant.

He could see Hermione Granger huddled under the sink in the far corner, the only sink left, her form shivering in fear. And looming above her was the largest, ugliest creature he had ever seen.

It looked human, or at least humanoid. It stood on two large feet attached to equally large, ungainly legs. It wore nothing more than a loin cloth and a frayed looking sleeveless shirt to cover its body. A large belly hung over the front of its loin cloth, looking like those pot belly's that hung out of

people's shirts and spilled over their pants; the kind of stomach Harry saw on people who were too lazy to exercise and drank too much alcohol. The massive, hulking figure had equally large hands. They looked like they could squash a human flat if given the chance. In one of those hands, the monster was gripping a large, wooden club, clearly the cause of the destruction to the room.

His gaze finally settled on the thing's face. Its head was disturbingly small compared to the rest of its body. It had a very dopey-looking facial expression. The creature's general features denounced a lack of intelligence. Black beady eyes were set above a large nose under an equally large mouth that had drool hanging from its lower lip, and he could see stained yellow teeth in its open mouth. It looked like a cross between a mentally deranged Rottweiler and a deformed baby. He recognized it from his self-study in defense as a troll.

It had stopped with its club half raised above his head and was looking right at him. Harry couldn't decide if that was good or not, but at least it meant Hermione was safe... for the moment.

Not wanting to be crushed by the creature or smacked by its club by getting too close, Harry flicked his wand at several broken pieces of toilet. The objects lifted into the air, hovering there, and another flick of his wand sent them sailing directly at the creature, pelting its face.

The beast roared and started swinging both its club and its free hand to try and swat the large chunks of toilet seat fragments out of the sky. Another flick of Harry's wrist sent even more broken objects flying at the creature, effectively distracting it.

"What are you doing just standing there!?" Harry asked, shouting at Hermione to be heard above the angry roaring. The girl looked at him like she had never seen him before, her mouth hanging open dumbly and her eyes wide. He wouldn't be surprised if she was going into shock. At least her trembling stopped. "Get over here!"

Hermione scrambled to her feet. The troll roared again and made to step toward her, but Harry sent another part of the room's broken décor at it. The stall door smacked it in the face, causing it to bellow in both surprise

and pain as it staggered back. In that time, Hermione ran over to him, and Harry did not waste another second in grabbing her hand and pulling her through the door in a dead sprint.

They had barely made it 10-feet from the bathroom when a loud roar sounded out. The sound was followed by the a loud crash as the troll smashed through the bathrooms entrance, sending stone fragments bouncing along the walls and floor.

It looked around, its head swiveling left and right before it spotted them running down the hall. Another loud bellow leapt from its gaping maw and it soon began charging them, its large feet smacking against the stone floor with the sound of war drum as it began to quickly catch up with its larger strides.

"Dammit!" Harry hissed as he let go of Hermione's hand and spun around. His wand was out quicker than the human eye could blink. He waved it at the suit of armor closest to the rampaging troll. The suit lifted off the ground and flew at the creature, smacking it flush in the face.

The troll angry bellow reverberated along the walls as its club swung down, hitting the chest plate. A loud noise issued from the plate mail, like the crack of thunder. The chest plate squealed as it dented and went flying into a wall where it dented some more, the wall itself cracking under the powerful blow.

Harry swore as the creature forgot about the armor entirely and turned its sights back on them. He looked left to see Hermione staring at the monstrosity in fear and swore some more.

"What the hell are you still doing here!?" he demanded. Hermione turned to him, her eyes wide and her face pale. "Get out of here! Go!"

"But—" Hermione tried to argue feebly, but Harry was having none of it.

"GO!"

In accordance with Harry's desires his magic flowed out, connecting to Hermione, compelling her to run. Normally, it would be very difficult to compel a magical being to do anything, especially subconsciously like

Harry was doing, but with his desperation fueling his already powerful magic, the compulsion managed to take hold despite Hermione's resilience. The mousy-haired brunette's eyes widened as the desire to flee overcame her, and her body responded to the external stimulus by turning on the spot and bolting down the corridor.

His sigh of relief was short lived as the troll had closed in on him during his preoccupation. It swung its club down with a loud grunt, the heavy wooden object moving far faster than should be possible for something of its size.

Harry dodged by moving into a forward shoulder-roll that took him past the club's point of impact. The club smacked the ground where he had been, denting it, sending cracks along the stone surface. Harry continued his roll, moving under the troll's legs.

He kipped back to his feet when he was behind it, his wand flashing out again, pointing at the creature's legs as he sent a leg-locking jinx. The spell struck the creature's left leg, only for nothing to happen. No straightening of limbs that had been locked in place. No loss of balance as the leg stiffened up. Nothing. It was as if the spell hadn't affected the troll at all.

Harry's eyes barely had time to widen as the troll spun around. Its club sailed towards him, the air screeching around it due to the speed with which it moved. Harry barely avoided the attack by letting himself fall backwards. He fell onto his back, then rolled with the move, before kipping back up to his feet and beginning to back pedal.

His wand arm flashed out, a slashing motion that he directed at the beast. A bright white light shot from the tip of his wand, the stinging hex hitting the troll in the belly, but again, there seemed to be little effect beyond the creature getting annoyed.

It roared at him, whether angered at not hitting him or the stinging hex, Harry didn't know. Whatever the case was, it came charging in once again and Harry was forced to sidestep another club swipe. He flicked his wand arm at another suit of armor and sent it at the creature, then another flick caused the suit to split into multiple pieces that floated

around the beast in an effort to distract it, while he tried to figure out why none of his spells were working.

Could it be that he wasn't putting enough power into his spells? That skin of it's looked tough. Maybe if he just put more power into his spells...

While the troll was busy trying to swat the armor out of the air, Harry sent another stinging hex its way, this time with much more power than before. The spell soared through the air, a bright white light that smacked against the troll's hide.

The troll let out a roar of annoyance and Harry's eyes narrowed when he saw that the spell had not even left a mark. On a human, a stinging hex of that power would have left a welt the size of his head for several days without magical treatment...

Were the situation not so dire, Harry would have groaned as he realized the problem. Of course. This creature just had to be magically resistant. That was the only explanation he could think of. Trolls were magical creatures, more so than a witch or wizard. It must have a very high level of resistance to most compulsion spells, minor hexes and jinks. Only a high level spell would be able to damage this thing.

Which meant Harry was pretty much out of luck. He hadn't studied offensive spells beyond the few taught in first year Defense Against the Dark Arts. He hadn't seen a need to. After all, why should he expect any kind of danger at a school protected by some of the most powerful enchantments known to wizard kind? Instead he had focused his efforts and private studies on transfiguration in preparation for becoming an animagus.

He was beginning to regret that decision now.

As the troll let out another roar and decided to ignore bashing the armor with his club in favor of smashing through the small blockade of floating objects to get to him, Harry decided that if he managed to survive this encounter, the first thing he would do was begin looking up offensive spells.

Dodging swing after swing from the much larger being's club, Harry had

never been more thankful for his martial arts training. The troll was not only stronger than him, but also incredibly fast, much faster than he would have ever expected a creature of that size to be. As things stood, the only reason Harry had not become a bloody smear on the ground was because of his experience in fighting opponents much more skilled than it (Master Wei), who didn't telegraph their moves to him.

Not that this creature's poorly telegraph moves mattered. Its hide was too tough for his spells to work against it, and its body too strong and durable for him to think of taking it on up close. As far as he could see, there was simply no way someone with a few weak first year defense spells could beat it. And unfortunately, if he did not defeat it, then it would kill him. He only needed to slip up once and he would be dead.

Well, if he couldn't beat it, maybe he could make it beat itself. Master Wei had always told him that if an opponent was too strong for him to beat, then he should find some way to use their strength against them. First he would have to find some way to get rid of that club, then maybe he could —

"HARRY!"

— His thoughts derailed, Harry's eyes widened in both shock and horror as he saw Hannah, Lisa, Neville, Susan and Terry rounding a corner. What the hell were they doing here!?

The five stopped upon seeing him, their bodies freezing in fear as they realized he was currently in a life or death struggle with a troll nearly three times their height and several dozen times their weight.

Harry dodged another club swing and flicked his wand at a helmet that had fallen to the ground, sending it hurtling at the troll's face. There was a loud clang as it smacked the creature, and the troll roared in both pain and anger, giving Harry enough time to try and convince his friends to run.

"What the bloody hell are you guys doing here!?" Shouted Harry. Another flick of his wand followed. Another piece of discarded armor crashed into the troll, angering it further. "Get out of here! Go find a teacher!"

Surprisingly enough, it was Neville who stepped forward, his wand clutched tightly in his shivering fist. In fact, his entire body was shivering. Despite the fear he obviously felt, he didn't seem to be leaving.

"We-we're n-not going t-t-to leave you," he muttered frightfully, his eyes wide and his breathing labored as he stared at the behemoth in front of them. He was clearly terrified of going up against the troll. The others said nothing, busy as they were staring in fear at the thing.

"You can't do any good here!" Harry countered frantically as he began magically throwing more and more objects at the troll to keep it distracted. It was working, partially at least. It wasn't looking at his friends, though by now it had figured out that he was causing the objects to attack it and was only swatting the armor that blocked its way to him. "RUN! Go find a teacher!"

In spite of his words, none of them ran. Hannah, Susan and Lisa stood where they were, quivering in the presence of a beast few adult wizards could take down. Terry didn't look much better, but at least he had his wand out.

"I'm not leaving!" Neville shouted, and despite the tremor in his voice, he held his wand aloft. He made a jerky slashing motion and sent a stinging hex the troll's way. The hex fizzled out before it could make it even halfway there. Neville had always had troubles with defensive spells, and in a situation like this, where his terror was nearly overpowering him, the chances of him accomplishing a spell was close to zero.

However, while the stinging hex may not have done anything to its intended target, it did have the effect of snapping Terry out of his stupor. The Ravenclaw first year sent his own hex at the troll, and it did hit the beast. Right on its rear.

Of course, the spell was not powerful enough for the troll to even feel it. Thus it did nothing, and Harry was forced to continue dodging the creature as he tried to convince his friends to run.

"Dammit, Neville! None of you can do anything against this thing! Its too strong! Get out of here now!"

Neville didn't seem to be listening to Harry though. Instead he had turned to the girls and Terry.

"We need to help him!" he said, his tone desperate, pleading. "Come on you guys! We need to do something!"

Lisa snapped out of her fright first. She looked at the troll, then at Neville, then at the other four with her.

"Maybe we could... if we attack it together we might be able to do something."

"It's as good a plan as any," Terry muttered in a shaky voice. He held up his wand and sent another stinging hex the troll's way with both Neville and Lisa doing the same. Neville's fizzled out again. Lisa's and Terry's hit, but it still didn't do anything.

"Come on you two," Neville pleaded with Susan and Hannah. "We need your help."

Hannah sucked in a deep breath, then turned wide eyes to Neville. After a moment, she closed her eyes and tried to control her frantic breathing. She still looked frightened, but it seemed as if she was at least not allowing it to control her. Susan came around at the same time and looked at Harry, her eyes gaining a determined glint that shown clearly under her fear.

"Ok," she whispered as she and Susan both pulled out their wands. Lisa, Neville and Terry followed suit, and all five of them sent a stinging hex at the troll. This time the spells not only hit, but the combined stinging hexes actually caused the creature to yowl in pain as it stumbled forward. Harry used the distraction to send another piece of armor at its face in the hopes it would stay focused on him.

It was not to be. It seemed that the combined stinging hexes hurt more than the armor hitting it had, and thus the troll deemed the five behind it a larger threat.

Harry swore as it spun around and began charging at the five with an earth-shattering bellow. Even worse, his friends had frozen when they

saw the behemoth rushing towards them with its club arm raised. He needed to do something and he needed to do it fast if he wanted to get all of them out of this in once piece.

In a last ditch effort, Harry pumped massive amounts of magic through his body, enhancing it beyond anything he had ever done before. He wouldn't be able to hold it for long, not without suffering severe consequences, but it would hopefully be enough for this.

He raced down the hall, his magically enhanced body almost but not quite matching the troll's own loping speed. Damn those much longer legs. He needed to slow this thing down.

A flick of his wrist and several dozen pieces of armor crashed into the creature's legs and feet, making it stumble. It lost its balance, crashing onto its hands and knees. Harry used that time to catch up and then did the unthinkable, not to mention the incredibly stupid.

He jumped onto its back.

It was hands down the dumbest thing he had ever done in his life, but Harry was barely even thinking straight at this point.

He flicked his wand and a stream of rope shot out. It looped around the troll's neck three times, then Harry caught the end with his other hand and tightened it.

The troll jerked upwards to its feet with an angry roar, its club lying forgotten on the ground. Its hands reached back to try and grab him, but the rope keeping him up began lengthening and Harry slid onto its lower back where it couldn't reach him.

For a moment, Harry dared to hope he had finally been given some breathing room. The troll couldn't reach him, he was finally up close, and he had a small window of opportunity to hurt it, if he could actually find a means *to* hurt it.

That thought was dashed into tiny pieces when the troll, unable to remove him from its back, began thrashing around like a raging bull in an effort to throw him off.

Harry was flung about like a rag doll. His right hand remained grasping the end of the rope tightly, while his left still had his wand clutched firmly, but that meant little when the rope had so much slack that his body was still violently flung off the troll's back. He could only count his blessings that the troll had not yet smacked him into a wall as there would be little to no chance of him getting up from that.

Seeing his plight, his friends once more began casting stinging hexes at the troll. Despite their good intentions, however, it was probably the worst decision they could have made. Rather than bring the beast down, the spells merely enraged it further. Its thrashing and shaking and floundering picked up in intensity, and Harry found himself getting smacked into several suits of armor that banged up his legs and back as he was tossed about like a fruit salad being handled by a mad chef on crack.

Barely containing his flinch when the bones in his shin snap as they hit hard metal, Harry began shunting the pain to the side and focused on reeling the rope in so he could find better purchase on the troll's back. No matter what happened, if he wanted to have any hope of surviving the next few seconds much less this encounter, he needed to have some kind of footing to keep steady.

It wasn't an easy task, especially with how violent the troll shook and the amount of pain his legs were in, but he had felt far worse before. The rope tightened as it 'moved' back into his wand like a fishing line being reeled in. His feet touched the troll's back and, for a moment, Harry began hoping that he would have some time to think up a plan. Even a second to catch a breather would be nice.

Apparently, it was too much to hope for.

The troll felt his feet as they planted themselves on its back and, having not had any luck catching him so far, decided to do probably the only thing it could to get him off.

It rammed into the wall back first.

Harry would have screamed in pain as the feeling of being crushed by mountains of muscle and the dense, hard granite of the wall speared

through his body, but all of the air had been driven from his lungs, so all that came out was a pained rush of breath and a shaky gasp.

He could feel his rib cage being brutally crushed by the surprise move. It was like nothing he had ever felt before. Like someone had just dropped an anvil on his chest, then decided to have a several ton elephant jump on him for good measure. It was pain beyond all belief and comprehension and nothing, not his spars with Master Wei, nor the occasional lashing he received from Vernon when he was younger, could have prepared him for this.

His vision began to blur. Everything became fuzzy, like the white noise you see in old black and white photos. Blackness invaded the edges of his vision.

Blood was beginning to fill his lungs. His mind, hazy from the pain and beginning to darken, could not even begin to catalog the damage done to him. But somewhere in the back of his mind, he could tell that his ribs had been crushed and several bone fragments from his ribcage had penetrated his lungs.

Breathing was becoming difficult. Already he could feel himself choking on the blood filling his air passages. Each breath brought not only excruciating amounts of asphyxiated agony, but also blood that spilled out of his mouth and ran down his chin.

Somehow, he wasn't sure how, or even fully aware of it, he still managed to keep a grip on his wand and the rope.

He couldn't help but wonder, as darkness continued to encroach on his vision, was this how he was going to die? Was this his end? Dying at the hands of a stupid beast that somehow snuck into the castle? Killed before he could ever achieve his dreams?

Such a thought would have normally left him in a rage, but he was beginning to feel tired. Too tired to call up even the smallest hint of anger, or any emotion for that matter. All he wanted to do was sleep.

Yes, that sounded nice. A good long rest. He felt he deserved that much at least.

"HARRY!"

Harry's eyes snapped open as the sound of five voices made him realize that his friends were still there. If he died now his friends would be killed. And despite any attempts at telling himself otherwise they *were* his friends. They weren't a means to an end anymore. He couldn't pretend that he was only concerned about what an alliance with them would bring. Where once it was all he concerned with, the benefits brought about by their friendship now seemed a trifling matter.

He might not care for them as much as he did Lisa Crawft, but he *did* care for them. Over the course of this past month he had come to greatly enjoy their presence. They were all so different, yet at the same time, they meshed together so well.

If variety is the spice of life, then they brought a lot of spice into his life.

He couldn't let them die. He *wouldn't* let them die.

In a last act of desperation, Harry completely opened the gates that kept his magic at bay. He could feel it beginning to flood into his body, could feel the excess leaking from him like an overflowing sieve.

And he could feel the small speck of darkness. The kernel of something that was not him, but still there, an evil that he had always known existed inside of himself, but had never been able to get rid of.

Those thoughts and others were washed away as soon as they came. They disappeared in an instant as the effect's of unblocking all of his magic became reality. The blood that had been choking him before stopped flooding his lungs. The intense agonizing pain that was his crushed ribcage diminished. And the fuzzy blackness that threatened to overwhelm him was pushed back.

With more strength than he should have been capable of, Harry pulled himself up the creature's back. He let go of the rope and grabbed a fistful of the troll's shirt. The rope dispersed from his wand as he brought the instrument down and shoved it into the troll's ear point first.

The troll howled and began to shake as its hand came up to grab him,

but Harry made his move before it could do so. He dredged up all the magic he could possibly control and sent it to his wand with only one thought on his mind.

To make sure this thing couldn't hurt his friends.

As his magic left him, and darkness descended upon his vision, the last thing he saw before meeting oblivion was the troll's head exploding in a spray of blood and brain matter.

Hope you all enjoyed the chapter!

Confusion

Confusion

Snape kept the near permanent sneer on his face as he looked around at all of the other occupants within Dumbledore's office. Filius Flitwick and Pomona Sprout stood off to one side, speaking in hushed tones, the more diminutive of the two making slight hand gesticulations while the other one looked nervous. Knowing how excitable they were Snape had no doubt their conversation was about what happened with Potter and the troll.

A frown made its way to his face and the urge to scowl was just barely resisted. Snape wasn't quite sure what to think of Potter. The spawn of the man he hated most. The child of the woman he loved. When he first saw the brat during the sorting ceremony, strutting up to the hat like he owned the place, he had been sure the boy would be just as arrogant and insufferable as his good for nothing father.

Now he wasn't sure what to think.

Off to the side opposite of him stood Minerva McGonagall, his counterpart in many ways. She was his exact opposite in all the ways that mattered, as a teacher and a person. Her lips were drawn into a thin line and, though it was slight, Snape could feel the anxiety coming off her in waves. Most would never notice, but he had, and he was sure that Dumbledore could see it as well.

The other teachers were there as well. The dark-skinned beauty and Astronomy professor, Aurora Sinistra stood between Professors Babbling and Vector, the Arithemancy and Runes teachers respectively. Charity Burbage, the Muggle Studies Professor, stood a little ways away from the others, and Quirrel had squirreled himself in the back close to the door.

Snape's sneer increased.

"Before we begin any extensive investigations into the troll's

appearance," the old headmaster began, forcing Snape to look away from the turban wearing teacher and focus on him. The required shifting needed to move that little bit from staring at Quirrel to the aging headmaster forced him to aggravate his right leg. He winced and quickly shifted so that he favored his left. "I would like to know how all of the students are doing. Minerva?"

The Deputy headmistress stepped forward.

"The Gryffindors are all fine and accounted for," she started, then grimaced. "With the exception of Mr. Potter." Snape followed her example. Thankfully, it went unnoticed. "The only other two I am worried about is Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom. From what I understand, Harry rescued Hermione from the troll when she was crying in the girl's restroom, and Neville was there when Harry killed the troll. He is a bit shell shocked right now. Not that I can blame him."

The line's around Minerva's eyes softened. It was almost unnoticeable. She was very good at hiding her feelings, but Snape could see it clear as day.

"Speaking of Harry, how is he doing?"

"He will live," Albus informed the room. There was a collective sigh of relief from everyone except Snape, who would never show such emotion to show, even if he was relieved that the son of Lily Evans hadn't died. "Though Madam Pomfrey informed me that he has a long way to go before making a full recovery. I did not get much more out of her before she kicked me out."

His attempt at humor fell on deaf ears. Snape rolled his eyes.

"Now then, Filius, Pomona, Severus, how are your students doing?"

"My Snakes are all fine," Snape drawled, yet on the inside he was frowning. Two of his students had been quite nervous when they heard the troll had landed Potter in the hospital wing. Tracey Davis and Blaise Zabini. He had no clue how they heard of the incident so quickly when all the students had been confined to their common rooms, but then, the Hogwarts rumor mill had always been quick when it came to doling out

information like this—even if more than half the time that information is completely inaccurate. He suspected the portraits to be involved somehow. "They are, of course, a bit shaken. The troll had first been spotted near the dungeons, after all."

"Aside from Terry and Lisa, my Raven's are doing well," Filius informed them. "The two of them are extremely worried about Harry. I had to give them both a dreamless sleeping potion in order to get them to bed. Had I not, I dare say they would have stayed up all night."

"It's the same with the Badgers. Susan and Hannah were quite distraught when they were brought in. Some of the older years are comforting them now. The rest are fine."

"I see." Albus absentmindedly stroked his beard. "And now, perhaps we can discover how it is that a troll managed to find its way into our castle."

All eyes turned to Quirrel, who was doing his best impression of a deer caught in the headlights. Snape's lips curled distastefully at the man.

"T-th-that was the l-l-last troll that l-l-l was h-hoping to b-b-bring in for the p-p-p-protections of the stone." Quirrel's whole body seemed to shake with fear. "l-it managed t-t-to escape my co-control and t-t-tried to k-k-k-kill me!"

Minvera's nostrils flared, and Snape sensed the woman was close to blowing up. She had never approved of letting trolls into Hogwarts. Not that Snape could blame her. He was not very fond of the idea either.

"If you had wanted to bring in another troll, perhaps you should have thought about telling myself or the Headmaster first!" Quirrel quivered under her stern glare. Snape narrowed his eyes at the man. "Even if you had wanted to bring in another for added security, you wouldn't have been able to deactivate the other protections without the other teachers anyways."

The Defense teacher began to stutter out apologies, but Dumbledore headed him off.

"What's done is done. We cannot undo the past, so let us move forward.

Severus, you were the one who investigated the aftermath of the incident with the troll. Tell me, what do you make of it?"

Snape did his best not to turn green as he remembered what he had found upon arriving at the sight of the battle. He had seen many disgusting things in his life, had watched Death Eaters kill and rape and pillaged without remorse, and had seen the gruesome aftermath of muggle and pureblood families that were killed by the Dark Lord himself and Bellatrix Lestrange. Very few things could evoke any kind of negative response from him these days. But the sight he came across in the corridor where he found a bloody and broken Potter lying on top of a headless troll had sickened even him. The horrid stench released from the troll's blood certainly hadn't helped.

"I can only take a guess at what happened," Snape began in the slow drawl he always used when talking. "From what I can determine, Potter somehow leapt onto its back, then managed to make its head explode after it tried to crush his body against a wall." Gasps were heard from Pomona, Aurora, Babbling and Vector. Minerva raised a hand to her mouth, and Filius let out a stifled squeak. "Troll's, as you know, have very thick, magically resistant hides. Not including darker spells, only an extremely powerful *Reducto* or *Bombarda* will do any damage to it. That suggests Potter had used one of the more tender spots on it's body to kill it. Given that he was on its back when we found him and his friends, I believe he had stuck his wand in the creature's ear."

"Are you saying that a first year managed to cast the ReductorCurse?" Flitwick squeaked. "That's a very powerful spell. I did not think a first year would ever be capable of using it."

"I did not say Potter used either of those Curses," Snape sneered. "The brat may have some modicum of talent." It was almost painful to admit, but even he could not deny that the son of Potter was talented. It most likely came from his mother. "But there is no way a first year would ever be capable using such an advanced spell. More than likely I suspect it was accidental magic. Perhaps his magic responded to his desperation and reacted in a manner similar to the *Bombarda*."

"That would make a great deal of sense," Dumbledore allowed pensively.

"Harry is an extremely powerful wizard." Snape scowled, but said nothing. "Rarely have I met a young man with such power. Not even Voldemort had that much raw power when he first started Hogwarts." There were many flinches at the Dark Lords name. Snape was not one of them. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, Quirrel wasn't either. Snape frowned as he laid eyes on the man, and tried not to shift his right leg too much.

"And you believe he is powerful enough that he can kill a troll with accidental magic?" asked Minerva, her lips forming a pensive line. "That is almost as outlandish as him knowing how to cast a spell that most people do not learn until their fifth year."

Albus Dumbledore's eyes began twinkling as he looked at his deputy headmistress, and Snape got the feeling that the old man knew more than he was willing to let on.

"Perhaps, but I do not think it is as farfetched as you believe."

XoX

Albus Dumbledore found himself lost in thought as he briskly walked down the halls toward the Hospital Wing. The crises caused by the troll sneaking into the castle had been averted, but not in the way he had hoped, not at all.

He had just finished a rather long string of conversations with the first year students (minus one) who had been directly involved in the incident. Hermione Granger had been the first he had seen. The poor girl had been the one who had found a teacher, Severus Snape, surprisingly, and directed him toward the female bathroom on the second floor where Harry had first rescued her from the troll. Of course, the troll and Harry had been gone by then, and they had left a clear path of destruction in their wake. Dumbledore had done his best to reassure the girl and let her know what happened had not been her fault. He had also spoken with all of Harry's friends to get their side of the story.

They had all been in a state of shock after their run in with the troll. Albus could not blame them; troll's were frightening creatures, their powerful hides, incredible physical strength, and impressive magical resistance rendered them immune to all but the most powerful of spells. Few were

the wizards capable of taking down a fully grown mountain troll on their own. That Harry had done so, albeit, accidentally, was impressive.

Yet even that posed a problem. Dumbledore had not seen the site of the battle, but from what he had heard from Severus painted a grisly picture. Hannah, Lisa, Neville, Susan and Terry were all so young, only just starting their first year at Hogwarts, and yet they had already been subject to a sight that would have not looked out of place during the war against Voldemort. He could only hope what they saw during this incident did not scar their minds and give them horrible nightmares and visions.

He could only imagine how bad it would be for Harry. While his friends had been there when the troll died, Harry was the one who killed it. Granted, he'd not had much choice; the troll would have killed him and his friends had he not done what he did, but Albus was still worried. The effects that the act of killing had on the human mind were horrible, that the one who had done the deed was a child would only compound the already complicated situation.

Dumbledore's thoughts were brought to an abrupt halt when he found himself standing in front of the infirmary doors. Without a moments hesitation, he pushed them open and walked in.

He found Madam Pomfrey exactly where he expected her to be, standing over her young charge running medical scans. Albus' heart fell through his chest when he saw young Harry lying on the bed, completely inert. The boy he had first seen at the Sorting Ceremony, so full of life and brimming with confidence now looked like a small child who had just gone through hell and been spat back out. His skin was pale and sweat poured from his body. He looked nothing at all like the intelligent and powerful young man reports from his teachers made him to be.

With quick steps, Dumbledore stood before the bed where the currently comatose boy lay.

"How is he, Poppy?"

Madam Pomfrey didn't answer right away, instead choosing to continue running what Dumbledore recognized as a diagnostics scan. This didn't bother him. The woman was a healer through and through, and cared

more for those under her care than she did for authority figures. He approved of that attitude. So he simply remained silent and waited until she finished.

"Surprisingly well," was the answer he got after a few moments. She turned her head to look back down at Harry and blew out a shaky breath. "Incredibly well, actually. He's healing at a phenomenal rate. If it keeps up, I suspect he will be ready for release by tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow.

"Normally, I would say this is a good thing, but you seem concerned."

"That is because of how injured he was coming in." Madam Pomfrey looked back up at Dumbledore, her face pensive. "When Harry was first brought to the infirmary he was nearly dead. In fact, I almost diagnosed him as dead and would have were it not for the faint heartbeat he had."

Dumbledore sucked in a breath.

"His wounds were terrible, Albus," Madam Pomfrey continued softly. "His entire ribcage had been crushed, he had several dozen bone fragments imbedded in various organs, including his lungs, spleen, stomach, pancreas, and large intestines. To top it off, his backbone had three hairline fractures running along his lower and middle back. He was just lucky his upper back had not gotten injured or his neck would have snapped."

Madam Pomfrey shook her head and looked back down at Harry.

"Such extensive wounds would have killed him, *should* have killed him, and yet not only is he alive, but his injuries are healing *without* my aid at a speed which baffles me. Already his organs have healed. The bones embedded in them are gone. His ribcage and spinal cord are currently on the mend. In short, he is well on the way to recovery, and all of this was done without my help."

"I... see..."

Dumbledore really didn't see. He simply said that for lack of having anything else to say.

Albus would freely admit that he knew very little about healing magic. It was one of those branches he only studied enough to be decent in, but never excel at, meaning he knew more than most but less than a professional. He knew many healing spells and counter curses and could brew a decent potion to cure most wounds and poisons, but the intricacies and theoretical knowledge of that particular branch of magic was lost on him.

"No Albus, you don't see," Madam Pomfrey told him. She was probably one of the few who ever spoke to him like that. "Harry Potter is healing himself on his own without any aid from an outside source! While it is true that a wizard's magic is capable of dealing with minor wounds and bruises over time, what is happening here is far beyond anything that should be possible. It defies the very laws of magic!"

Dumbledore did not respond to Madam Pomfrey's rant with words. He merely closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked at Harry with his mage sight.

The boy's magic was greatly diminished from what it had been before. No longer was it blindingly radiant to the point where he could not even look at it for fear of going blind. No longer did his magic saturate his body to the point where he couldn't even see the child's magical core. Now it merely looked like an inferno centered around a gaseous ball of green energy that crackled with power. Still strong, but not like before.

Yet as he watched, Dumbledore saw tendrils of that energy emitting outward from the boy's core. It slithered along his body, latching onto specific areas that he could only assume were places Harry had been injured. It was fascinating to watch, unlike anything he had ever seen.

"His core is surprisingly resilient for one so young," the Headmaster commented. He was musing out loud, both for himself and for the school nurse. "If I did not know any better, I would almost say I was looking at the core of an adult wizard rather than the core of a young eleven-year old boy."

Madam Pomfrey frowned.

"And what does this mean?"

"It means, Poppy," Albus Dumbledore said with a smile, "that there is much more to young Harry than first meets the eye."

XoX

I could feel my magic beginning to leave me as my consciousness started to slip away. The last thing I saw before succumbing to oblivion was that of the troll's head exploding in a spray of blood and brain matter that splattered along the floor, walls and ceiling.

The first thing Harry Potter did upon returning to full consciousness was jerk up from where he lay into a sitting position.

The second thing he did was vomit all over the once perfectly white bed sheets covering him. He continued to throw up long after he'd gotten rid of everything and there was nothing left inside of his stomach to release. Despite attempts to desist, he found himself incapable of doing anything other than dry heaving as his stomach continued to reject something that was not even there.

His mind and body rebelled against him as the last thing he saw before passing out embedded itself into his mind, forcing him to watch it over and over and over again in a constant, never ending sequence, taunting him in ways he had not experienced since learning the art of meditation.

The sight of the trolls head as it exploded, gore splattering across his face and body, the troll without its head as it crumbled to the floor, and the knowledge that he was the one who killed it.

Harry Potter had seen a number of horrifying events in his life, things that would have made adults twice his age cower in fear at or cringe at the sight of. The night Voldemort attacked his home, his father's yelling to get him to safety while he held the man off, cruel laughter as James Potter's life was extinguished by a bright green flash of light and the killing curse being called out by the hissing voice of Voldemort. His mother's death, her willing sacrifice to save him. The look in Voldemort's eyes when the

man had tried to kill him. The first five years of his life with the Dursleys. He had seen much, and he had dealt with much. Cruelties that would have broken most children, that would have turned them into lifeless shells of their former selves or monsters whose rage had long since consumed them.

Death. Murder. Violence. Hatred. Isolation. Demeaning insults meant to cower him. To make him weak. Yes, he had dealt with much, and he was stronger for it.

But never before had he killed another. He had seen death when he was but a child of one, but never had he been the one who raised his hand and dealt the killing blow. Now he had. Yes, it was a troll. Yes, it was not human, but that hardly mattered. He had killed. He felt sick, stained, dirty. Tainted. All he could see was the sight of the troll's head exploding in front of him. All he could feel was the blood and pink fleshy bits of brain matter splashing against his face when he killed the troll who attacking his friends.

His friends. Oh gods. What did his friends think of him now that he had killed? Would they still want to be his friends now that he was a killer? Would they still like him? Would they still want to spend time with him?

As if sensing his increasing anxiety, his body went into overdrive and his dry heaving turned into hyperventilating. His body began to shake, his breathing became labored, his hands clenched at the stained bedsheets, not even registering the vomit they were getting covered in.

He tried to stop, to calm himself down. He really did. But it seemed like the harder he tried the worse his condition became.

"Mr. Potter, quickly, drink this!"

Before Harry knew what was happening, he was forced back onto the bed, his mouth forcibly opened and one of the most fowl concoctions he had ever tasted was shoved down his gullet. His memory immediately cataloged the taste and told him he was drinking a calming draught, a powerful potion used to calm people down when their emotions were running high. This particular one appeared to be more powerful than the standard potion. Different ingredients too. Were it not for the fact that he

had not given anyone else any of the potions he had made, he would dare say this was one of his.

His mind calmed as the potion took effect. Harry looked up to see Madam Pomfrey running a glowing wand over his body. The vomit that stained his bedsheets vanished.

"How odd," the woman muttered. Madam Pomfrey was a stern-looking woman with a no nonsense expression that would not be out of place on Professor McGonagall. She had gray hair and several wrinkles around her eyes, mouth and temples. She wore standard medical garb for mediwitch: white sleeveless robe with the Hogwarts crest sown over a long brown-sleeved shirt, and a white wizards hat that trailed down her head. "You do not seem to be experiencing any illness and I can detect no fever, but you are exhibiting some signs of the muggle flu. Pale face, vomiting..."

"I'm fine, Madam Pomfrey," Harry rasped. Madam Pomfrey huffed.

"I will be the one to decide whether or not you are fine, and you, young man, are most definitely *not* fine."

Harry's mouth turned into a displeased frown. He opened his mouth to tell this woman off for thinking she knew how he felt better than him, when the double doors to the infirmary opened up and in strolled Albus Dumbledore.

"Ah." The Headmaster smiled as his eyes laid sight of Harry, the twinkle in them going strong. "I see you are finally awake."

"Headmaster," Harry greeted with a curt nod, masking his emotions well. The venerated wizard's appearance just a few minutes after waking up was too coincidental for him to just be 'happening by.' He must have known the exact moment Harry had woken up. A charm of some kind, perhaps?

"How are you feeling, Harry?"

"Fine, Professor," Harry replied politely.

"You are not fine, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey retorted. "People who are fine do not throw up the moment they awaken. Nor do they start going into seizures."

Harry's lips became a thin line. He opened his mouth to make a retort when Dumbledore headed him off.

"I was wondering, if perhaps, I could speak to Harry for a moment alone, Poppy?" The twinkle was redirected from Harry to the school mediwitch. "I promise it shan't take long."

Madam Pomfrey huffed, then sighed.

"As if I could stop you anyways. Oh, very well. You can speak to him, but make it quick."

As Madam Pomfrey walked off, Dumbledore turned his attention back to Harry.

"How are you feeling, Harry?"

Harry shifted.

"Fine, professor."

"You gave us quite the scare, you know?" Dumbledore continued, seemingly not bothered by the lack of enthusiastic response. "All of the teacher's were quite worried when Professor Snape found you in such terrible condition."

The Headmaster looked down at him. Harry shifted again and he smiled.

"You will be pleased to know that your friends are safe."

There was a sudden relaxing of his posture as Harry breathed a sigh of relief. It felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Even though he was still worried about his friends response towards what he had done, he couldn't deny that he had been worried about them. Incredibly worried. More than he wanted to be.

It was somewhat bothersome to feel so concerned about people he had only known for a month, but there was little he could do about that, so he did his best to put it out of his mind.

"That's good," he mumbled softly. "Thank you for informing me, Professor Dumbledore."

"Think nothing of it, my boy." Dumbledore's grandfatherly eyes twinkled merrily. "And now that we have that out of the way, perhaps you can inform me of the events that led to your encounter with the troll, as well as the encounter itself."

Harry frowned as he thought of the best way to explain what happened. He needed to be honest, but he didn't want to reveal anything too personal.

"I was practicing some magic in one of the unused classrooms on the second floor," Harry began carefully, calculatingly. He was interrupted by Dumbledore.

"And why did you decide to not come to the feast?"

Harry closed his eyes.

"I have no desire to celebrate Halloween."

"I see." Dumbledore seemed to age a bit. The twinkle in his eyes dimmed and it looked as if a great weight had settled on his shoulders. "I suppose I can understand why you would not wish to celebrate that particular day. Nor can I blame you. I would probably be of like mind were our positions reversed."

Harry gave the man a nod of acknowledgment, but didn't speak. After a moment, Dumbledore seemed to brighten again. Strength returned to his body and he was once more the Headmaster of Hogwarts and one of the most powerful wizards in the world.

"Please continue, Harry."

"Right," Harry sighed, "after a while I had gotten hungry and decided to

go down to the kitchens to grab a bite to eat before heading off to my dormitory when I heard a scream. I recognized it and realized Hermione was in danger when her scream was followed by a roar and the sound of something being smashed to pieces."

Harry paused, then took a breath.

"I ran over to where I heard the scream and found Hermione huddled against a corner in the women's restroom. The room was destroyed, and the troll was standing over her readying a killing blow. I did the only thing I could think of. Distract it and grab the girl. I was hoping we could get away from it, but it chased us down the hall and managed to catch up. I decided to send her away while I acted as a distraction. It wasn't my best decision, but I couldn't think of anything else to do at the time. I thought I could distract the troll long enough for her to get a teacher, or for a teacher to find me. Then my friends came."

Harry felt a mixed reaction about that moment, the moment his friends found him and decided to stick around despite him telling them to run. On the one hand, he felt... happy, that they would risk their lives for him. It truly was nice to know they were willing to risk life and limb for him.

On the other, it was an incredibly foolish thing to do and they could have easily gotten themselves killed.

Normally, this would have angered him. Of course, he was currently on the effects of a very potent calming draught, so all he could dredge up at the moment was irritation for them not listening to him.

Harry shook his head, willing his thoughts away.

"Suffice it to say things went from bad to worse, and I ended up jumping on its back and getting my ribcage crushed." Harry shrugged as Dumbledore winced. "It was mere luck that I'm still alive."

Luck. How he disliked relying on something as inconsistent as luck. He would not deny that throughout the entire battle, it had been luck that kept him alive. Luck that the troll had been so incredibly stupid. Luck that it had no experience in combat or the ability to think tactically. Luck that it telegraphed its moves so blatantly he could dodge the incredibly fast

swings of its club. And luck that he had been magically reinforcing his body when the troll tried to crush him between itself and the wall. Yes, Harry would admit he was extremely lucky to have survived the encounter.

That didn't mean he had to like it.

"Sometimes you will find that a little luck can go a long way," Dumbledore told Harry cheerfully. Harry just stared at the man with a blank look, wondering if perhaps people's belief that the venerated Headmaster being a tad barmy held more truth to them than anyone realized. Maybe the old man truly was as touched in the head as people claimed.

"Harry." The tone of voice Dumbledore used changed. Gone was the cheery voice, and in its place was one filled with regret. The twinkle had also gone out of his eye. "I am terribly sorry that you were forced to confront the troll yesterday."

"It's not your fault headmaster," Harry replied a little dumbly. He wasn't sure what was more surprising; Dumbledore apologizing to him, or the entire situation that constituted the man apologizing in the first place. "Sometimes these things happen, and there really isn't much we can do about them."

"That is true, but this incident nearly got you killed," Dumbledore said quietly. He seemed disquieted by this fact. Granted, he was the headmaster of Hogwarts, so of course he would be worried about one of his charges dying. That the person almost killed was the Boy-Who-Lived just made the situation that much worse. Harry could only imagine the scandal his death would cause. But it seemed more personal than that. Harry couldn't explain it, but he had the feeling Dumbledore was taking this incident more personally than he normally would have. "And worse still was that you were forced to kill, something I hoped no one would be forced to do again since the war with Voldemort ended, especially one so young."

Harry grimaced. He really didn't want to think of how he had killed something. Even under the effects of the calming draught his mind was constantly showing him that last image of the troll's head exploding

before he black out.

"I want you to know, Harry," Dumbledore began, looking at him behind those half-moon spectacles. "That while killing is something I do not condone, it is something that, unfortunately, is sometimes unavoidable." The Headmaster grimaced, as if just admitting this truth was painful. "There are times when a situation may require you to choose between the lives of the innocent and those trying to take those lives. It is a very unfortunate circumstance, and one I had hoped you would never be forced into."

He paused, then gave Harry a smile and a pat on the shoulder.

"What you did last night, you did because you didn't have any choice. Trolls are notoriously difficult to incapacitate, much less kill. Only the most experienced full grown wizards can take on a mountain troll and live. That you did so is remarkable, that you did so while protecting your friends is admirable. Had the teachers found you in time things may have been different. Alas, things do not always happen the way we wish them to. I want you to know, Harry, that you did the right thing."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, and he meant it. Much as he may hate to admit it, his mind still reeled from what he had done, potion or no potion. Dumbledore's words went a long way toward easing his mind.

"You are most welcome." Dumbledore's congenial smile was back in place. The twinkle in his eyes returned, and he stood back up. "Now then, I think I will take my leave before Poppy decides to kick me out." Harry offered the ancient looking man a small smile. "have a pleasant day, Mr. Potter."

As soon as Dumbledore made to leave, Madam Pomfrey came back in and began fussing over him. Harry sighed as he leaned back against his pillow and let the woman do her job. Hopefully, cooperating with the mediwitch would get him out of the hospital wing that much faster.

As the school mediwitch ran several diagnostic spells, he found himself regretting only one thing: that he did not have a good book to help quell his boredom.

XoX

It was nearly an hour later that Harry was finally allowed to leave the hospital wing. A quick casting of the tempus spell showed him that it was currently lunch time, and so the raven-haired young boy made his way toward the Great Hall, his shoes thudding along the stone floor, bouncing off the walls.

The halls were empty. Everyone was probably already in the Great Hall. That left Harry plenty of time to think about the reaction he would be receiving from the other students when he arrived.

He was under no illusion that everyone had heard about what happened by now. The Hogwarts rumor mill worked fast, especially when it came to anything concerning him. The fact that this particular incident involved him killing a troll would only exacerbate things. No doubt there would be hundreds of different rumors involving what he had done and how he had done it.

He wasn't too worried about rumors. In the grand scheme of things, rumors would only boost his reputation right now, though he did imagine some people would be afraid of him. No, what he was worried about was the reaction of his friends. Would they fear him like some of the other students surely would? Would they be disgusted by what he had done? Would they want to even continue being his friend? So many questions, all of which could only be answered by confronting them.

A part of him was bothered by how worried he was about their opinions of him. While he did indeed care about what others thought of him, perhaps even more than he should, he had never worried to this extent. He had cared, but only insofar as how the beliefs and opinions of others would affect his reputation. This was different. In this instance, he was actually afraid they would think he was a monster and not want to spend anymore time with him. And that bothered him far more than he wanted to admit.

Before long Harry found himself standing just outside of the Great Hall. He closed his eyes, centering himself by taking several deep breaths and emptying his mind of his worries and concerns. Properly centered, he entered the Great Hall, prepared to face whatever came his way.

As expected, the moment he entered the entire hall became silent. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop, and Harry instantly likened the disquieting silence to the term 'silent as the grave,' a rather morbid phrase if there ever was one.

Just like he had theorized Harry received many varied looks. Everything from awe to fear to jealousy was displayed by the many faces around him. Harry's mind quickly went to work cataloging the reactions of everyone there and taking careful note of who had which expression. It would be invaluable to know who was afraid of him and who was simply in awe of him.

Slowly, Harry walked down the Great Hall, the heads of many students turning to keep him in sight. His eyes managed to find his friends quickly enough. They were seated at the Ravenclaw. Terry, Lisa and Neville were on one side, while Susan and Hannah were on the other. Their expressions all ran along the lines of being stunned, as if they didn't know what to make of him appearing before them.

Over at the Slytherin table he also saw Blaise giving him an expressionless look. When Harry caught the dark-skinned Italian boy's eyes, the Slytherin nodded in silent acknowledgment. He returned the nod with one of his own. Tracey, on the other hand, was biting her lower lip and looked like she was barely managing to restrain herself from leaping out of her seat and rushing over to him. Knowing her, he would be giving a full recounting of the event that led to him being admitted into the hospital wing.

He did get a bit of a surprise when he looked to Tracey's right and saw Daphne staring at him with a furrowed brow. He was surprised because she wasn't looking at him with cold disdain. Her lips were turned downwards into a small frown, and her eyes only contained a hint of the ice they normally had. Instead they looked pensive. He wondered what she was thinking about.

"Harry!"

All thoughts on Daphne and everything else were completely derailed when a redheaded missile launched herself at him. Surprised would not

be the appropriate word to describe what Harry felt when he found his arms full of a crying Susan Bones. He had never expected any of his friends to react like this after the incident with the troll, least of all shy, demure and often times incredibly quiet Susan. Hannah maybe, if she didn't think he was a monster and fear him for what he had done. That girl was very excitable. Susan though, definitely not.

"Thank Merlin you're alright! I was so worried about you! You were in such terrible shape that I was afraid you had been killed! You're not hurt are you? Oh, I'm so sorry I couldn't be of any help!"

The girl was babbling. Her worry spilling out of her mouth at such speeds that Harry's mind had to work over time to decipher them. He had no idea the girl could talk this fast. She would give Lisa a run for her money!

"I'm sorry for worrying you." Harry was unsure of what to say so he said that. At the very least it halted the girl's frantic babbling. He also decided to reciprocate her hug as it would probably hurt her if he didn't. This was the first time he had hugged someone whose name was not Lisa Crawft. It felt very different than the hugs he shared with his best friend. Different, but not unpleasant.

Yet, while Harry hugged Susan, he felt his mixed emotions come back. Anger and joy warred with each other for his attention. A part of Harry felt tempted to begin berating Susan and the others for their foolish decision to stay and try to fight that troll with him while another part simply wanted to bask in the fact that they didn't hate him and still cared for him despite what he had done.

This strange combination of emotions confused him. Harry had always thought himself to be above most emotional responses. Sure, Lisa could evoke a lot of emotions in him, but she had been his friend for years and he'd never felt such a complicated array of opposing emotions when dealing with her. That his new friends could bring out two feelings that stood in direct opposition of each other was shocking, and he wasn't entirely sure how to handle it.

A deep breath was taken as Harry tried his best to calm the thoughts and feelings raging inside of him. He would deal with his friends later, he

decided. It would not do to berate them now when they were in front of their peers. He was angry, but not that angry, and he didn't want to alienate his friends from him. For now, he would just pretend nothing was wrong and enjoy his lunch with them.

While Harry worked through his emotional confusion, Susan's face took on the shade of a small red sun, as she realized that she had just run up to Harry and hugged him in front of the entirety of Hogwarts. It didn't help that he hugged her back. With impressive speed, the girl jerked herself away from Harry like she'd just been burned. At the same time, the shock of seeing Harry walking into the Great Hall and Susan of all people practically jumping their friend wore off, and the others who had been sitting at the Ravenclaw table got up and ran over to Harry.

"Harry, mate, are you alright?" asked Neville. Harry bade to answer, but before he could Hannah interrupted him.

"Merlin's beard, Harry! You scared us half to death with that stunt you pulled!"

Harry's nostrils flared for a moment as the urge to tell her that the stunt she and the others had pulled was just as stupid, but held back. Now was not the time, he reminded himself.

Calming down before anyone could notice his growing anger, Harry sat down with his friends at the Ravenclaw table. By now, the other students had gotten back to their food and conversation, though Harry could hear from the closest cluster of students that whatever they had been talking about was no longer their topic of conversation.

Unless, of course, they had been talking about his fight with the troll *before* he came in.

Lunch was not the fun affair it had become for him. Oh, it was still filled with chatter and joking like always, and Harry certainly acted like he was having a good time. But honestly, he really just wanted to finish lunch so he could drag his friends off and yell at them for not listening to him the night before. Harry was just grateful none of them were skilled at reading other people, or they might have actually noticed that his smiles and laughs were even faker than the ones he gave when he had been at

muggle school.

Eventually, lunch ended. It was Thursday, so they didn't have classes afterward, which meant it was the perfect time for Harry to let them know his displeasure.

Which was why after lunch, at Harry's insistence, Hannah, Lisa, Neville, Susan and Terry all found themselves standing in an unused classrooms on the second floor. It was, in fact, the very same classroom Harry had used when practicing Transfiguration last night, before that troll had tried turning him into a human pancake.

He selected this place for two reasons. One, because it was secure and no one came here very often. And two, because he wanted to remind them of what happened last night so his talk would be that much more effective.

During lunch he had worked up a whole speech to that he would give them on how foolish they had been to ignore his order to leave and find a teacher, and how disappointed he was in them. Yet now that they were here, the words hanging off the tip of his tongue, Harry wasn't all that sure about what he wanted to say anymore. Or maybe he was just afraid of losing their friendship.

No, Harry mentally shook his head. That wasn't it. They needed to understand that what they had done was dangerous and stupid. They needed to know why they couldn't do something like that again.

"Harry?" Lisa interrupted the boy's thoughts, a curious and slightly worried expression on her face. "Are you alright?"

"No," Harry told her, running a hand through his hair and blowing out a large breath at the same time. "No, I am not. In fact, I am incredibly disappointed in all of you." Every single one of Harry's friends blinked. Then their eyes widened. They looked like they wanted to say something, but he wasn't going to let them get a word in before he finished.

"Just what in the bloody hell were you guys thinking?! Sticking around while a murderous troll was rampaging through the castle when I explicitly told you to leave!"

Neville and the others took a step back in shock and a little bit of fear when Harry gave them a fierce glare. It was a look they had never seen on him before. In fact, no one had ever been subject to this glare except the Dursleys when he was younger. The only difference between this one and the one he often gave his relatives was that the look he gave now contained worry, while the other had been an expression of Harry's hatred.

Both had the same effect, however, and were utterly terrifying to behold.

"H-Harry," Neville stuttered out, looking more than a little intimidated. "W-we just wanted to help you, mate."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe I didn't need help?" asked Harry, practically hissing now. He was beginning to get worked up. Not even his skills in Occlumency were helping him keep a clear head. "Did it never occur to you that perhaps I had a plan for dealing with the troll? That maybe I had everything under control before you interfered?"

"It didn't look that way," Terry muttered, only to stiffen when Harry's eyes, blazing with emerald green fire the same color as the killing curse, pierced his own like a spear. The Ravenclaw boy gulped, but somehow managed to find his voice. "We all saw how much trouble you were in. That thing was close to squashing you like a grape."

"The troll would have never hit me," Harry told him adamantly. "Troll's are notorious for their strength, not their brains or lightning fast reflexes. It would have never touched me. And had you lot not decided to try and play hero and simply gone off and found a teacher like I told you to, none of what happened last night would have happened! Gods, the only reason I even ended up half dead was because it went after you guys!"

Everyone flinched as Harry made his point. Terry and Neville looked stricken, torn between wanting to argue with their friend and acknowledging that he may actually have a point. Lisa had a hand close to her mouth and was shaking her head, eyes watering with tears that refused to fall. Susan and Hannah were much worse. The blond pig-tailed girl looked like someone had just killed her puppy, while her friend stared at the ground, shoulders shaking as she shed silent tears.

A part of Harry felt guilty, but he squashed that part and reminded himself that they needed to understand how foolish their actions had been. They needed to realize that they could have easily been killed.

"I had everything under control." Harry rounded on them again. "And it would have continued to stay that way had you five not been so bloody stupid and just ran like I told you to!"

"We couldn't leave you!"

Once again, all were surprised by Susan Bones as she shouted at Harry. Even the young raven-haired boy found himself staring at the girl in wide eyed surprise.

"We couldn't just leave you," Susan said again, her red hair flying about her face like ardent flame whipping about in a strong breeze. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her body shook from the emotions pouring from her. "I could have never forgiven myself if something happened to you. What if you were hurt, or worse, killed? If something had happened to you I—"

Susan broke off. More tears ran from her eyes and down her cheeks. She shook her head once, as if to dispel whatever had caused her to stop talking, but was unsuccessful.

As everyone else stared at the normally shy and quiet girl in shock, Harry closed his eyes as guilt finally overwhelmed him. Yes, what they had done was stupid and beyond reckless, but really, were his actions that night any better? He had run head first into danger the moment he heard Hermione's scream. He had fought against a troll with only a small set of first year defense spells in his repertoire. And when his friends had been in danger he had jumped on said troll's back, as if that would actually do something. He may have been able to kill it in the end, but that had been act of luck, not skill.

"Look..." Harry blew out a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. "It's not that I don't appreciate your desire to help it's just..." he paused, hesitating, then shook his head. "It's just that you guys could have easily been killed. What if that troll managed to reach you before I reached it? What would have happened if I had been just a tad slower

with my wand? What if that last second spell I used to trip it hadn't worked? That thing would have killed you, and I..." He grit his teeth, refusing to shed any tears. "... I don't think I could ever live with myself if something happened to any of you."

His friends dropped their heads in shame. Harry shut his eyes and shook his.

"That's why I need you to understand," Harry looked at the group of mixed house company imploringly. "You can't act so recklessly. If I ask you guys to do something, it's because I know what I'm doing, because I have a plan. I acknowledge that I what I did was little better, but I also know my own limitations, and killing that troll had never been in my plans. I was only hoping to distract it long enough for a teacher to come by. That's why I asked you to run."

"We're sorry, Harry." Susan seemed to be the spokesperson for the group right now. The other four didn't speak, none of them were even capable of it. Hannah and Lisa were sniffing, and Neville and Terry looked physically ill. "We promise, if something dangerous like this happens again and you tell us to do something, we'll put our trust in you."

"Well, hopefully nothing like this will happen again," Harry said, grimacing. "And I'm... I'm also sorry. I didn't mean to be so harsh. It's just, aside from Lisa, you guys are the only friends I have. I don't want any of you to get hurt."

"We feel the same way, Harry," Neville told him. Everyone else agreed, and Harry felt whatever anger left from their actions fade away. He just couldn't stay mad at them. He didn't *want* to stay mad at them. "You're our friend. That's why we couldn't leave you to face that thing alone."

"Thank you." Harry couldn't quite contain his smile. Despite seeing him gruesomely kill a troll, in spite of him throwing harsh—and admittedly hypocritical—words in their face, they still wanted to be his friend.

A strange warmth spread through his body, a feeling he normally only associated with Lisa Crawft.

He really did find a great group of people here at Hogwarts.

XoX

Harry Potter waited until everyone else had gone to bed. To his left he could, Neville lay curled in a ball. Seamus and Dean had also entered dream land, and he could hear the black boy mumbling football plays in his sleep while the Irish child snored away.

Sitting up as slowly as possible so as not to make the bed squeak and possibly awaken the other three boys in his dormitory, Harry carefully brought his legs over the edge of the bed and slid off.

His bare feet touched warm, fuzzy carpet, and the raven-haired child crept over to the foot of his bed with light, silent footsteps.

Kneeling down next to his trunk, he hissed the word that would allow him to unlock it.

"Open."

There was a soft click as the lock on the trunk undid itself. The small dial began to rotate until it reached the number one, where some of his most important items were stored.

He pushed the trunk open, revealing a ladder attached to the rim closest to him. Stepping onto the first set of rungs, Harry began his journey into his trunk.

The small tunnel of space in his trunk soon expanded as he reached the halfway mark. The barely two by three feet of space was now large enough to fit the entire wardrobe of most famous actresses. Or a large library of books. For that was what Harry had turned this particular compartment of his trunk into. Lining all four walls from top to bottom were large bookshelves filled with books.

Ok, so there were not as many books as he would like to have. Currently he only had 250 books that he had bought from Flourish and Blotts, enough to keep him occupied for a good while, but nowhere near the amount he wanted. That was fine, though. He planned on filling this entire compartment with books in due time.

While the library itself was not very big, it was incredibly well organized. All of his books were divided thematically, that is to say, they were divided by subject, by what branch of magic they were. History. Transfiguration. Charms. Defense Against the Dark Arts. Etc. etc. And those categories were further divided by the level of knowledge they contained; beginner, intermediate, advanced, and so on.

As Harry's bare feet hit the tiled floor on the bottom, he set off toward the left of the small library, where he kept all the books he picked up on combat magic. Technically, it was not called combat magic by anyone but him. He had coined the term when organizing his library. Any book that spoke of using offensive and defensive spells to either defend yourself from attack, or attack your enemy, he considered combat magic because it held similarities to his martial arts: attacking and defending oneself and others from someone or something that was trying to hurt or kill.

His fingers trailed along the spines of the books, eyes scanning their titles. *Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed. A Compendium of Common Curses and Their Counter-Actions. Confronting the Faceless. Curses and Counter-Curses. Dark Arts Defense: Basics for Beginners. Defensive Magical Theory.* And many, many more. All together he had around twenty books on combat magic alone. It wasn't very extensive, not by a long shot, but it was more than enough to get started and that was what mattered.

He stopped walking when his finger landed on *A Beginner's Guide to Dueling*. It was one of four books he had on Dueling, one of the subbranches of combat magic, along with *The Intermediate Duelist, Advanced Dueling Tactics*, and *Spells for Dueling; a Compilation of Curses, Jinxes, and Hexes*.

Grabbing the book's spine, he pulled the beginner's dueling book off the shelf. It would not help if another troll decided to attack, but that was ok. He highly doubted that another troll would come rampaging through the castle again. Not when the first one obviously failed at doing whatever it was supposed to do.

For the rest of the night, Harry Potter would spend his time reading up on dueling. He would need to know, just in case he ran into the person who

decided to set the troll lose.

He would also need to know about what was on the third floor corridor, because he was sure that whatever Dumbledore was hiding there was the reason the troll had been let lose in the first place.

Well... I actually think this chapter turned out pretty well, don't you? Action, drama, Harry getting crushed by a troll, troll's head exploding like an overripe fruit. All the kinds of things we like to see.

For those of you who have been telling me that Harry is not Gryffindor enough in your reviews of previous chapters, I want to point out that the reason for this is because there has been no reason for him to show his Gryffindor side. So far he has only been dealing with class, friends, and the occasional bully aka Malfoy. None of those particular points require reckless bravery, though I do think I showed a bit of his Gryffindorism during try-outs.

I also hope that this chapter showcased his Gryffindor and Hufflepuff sides better for you.

If you have any questions, comments, concerns, or critiques, please leave them in a review and if it does not spoil the story, I will endeavor to respond and/or take your advice under advisement for my coming chapters.

Or if you just want to tell me how awesome I am that's always appreciated too. Nothing beats ego boosts except more ego boosts.

And sex, can't forget the sex.

Peace out.

P.S. I would like to thank MrNeedsToRemoveAllFavs for his help in correcting one of my awkwardly sounding sentences, and cmcwiki and Melkijad for pointing out my use of Mglaggen instead of Mclaggen. Thank you very much! :D

Three Heads are Better than One

Three Heads is Better than One

"GRYFFINDOR!"

The words echoed all the way to the back of the hall, unencumbered by any other noises. It probably had something to do with the acoustics of the room, as well as the fact that the hall had gone completely silent.

I lifted the Sorting Hat off my head and saw that everyone was staring at me in shock. I saw mouths hanging wide open, eyes bulging from their sockets and looking about ready to simply roll out of their skulls in surprise. No one even blinked as they stared at me, and I suppose I can't blame them, my sorting did take a good deal of time.

Deciding not to let the stares bother me, I stood up and placed the sorting hat back on the stool. I spared a glance at Professor McGonagall. Her emotions were masked much better than everyone else's, but I could see her surprise as well. The other teachers were the same, except for two. The man I recognize from my card as Albus Dumbledore, who stared at me with an expression of intrigue, and the Professor with greasy hair and a hooked nose, who leered at me like I was the dirt beneath his boots.

I almost got angry at that leer. It reminded me of how Vernon Dursley used to look at me before I put the fear of god into him. But I simply took a deep breath, held it, allowed my mind to clear of any emotions that could cloud my judgment as I breathed out, and turned away.

It wouldn't do to lift one of my professor's and hurl them through a wall or, heaven forbid, one of those stained glass panels on my very first day of school. I hear it's bad form.

I walked toward my designated table, the one where children are decked out in red and gold. Gryffindor. The House of the Brave. Everyone was still gawking at me, their eyes wide and mouths open.

For a second, I wonder if I made a mistake in choosing this House to be the one I'll live in for seven years. I squashed the impulse to analyze my decision to join Gryffindor. The choice has now been made. Second guessing would only serve to distract me from my goals.

It was not until I am nearly halfway to the Gryffindor table that said table erupted into a frenzy. All of the students stood up and begin clapping and cheering. I saw the two Weasley twins chanting, "we've got Potter!" as loudly as they could. They looked like they'd just won the lottery.

I guess I can't blame them. Much as I detest the thought, my fame alone makes me a desirable asset for any of the four houses. Just another reason to dislike the house system, I guess.

I finally reach the table and am swept in a round of laughs and back slaps as everyone tried to greet me at once. I smiled and greeted those around me, presenting them the image I wanted them to see. First impressions are everything, and I need to make a good first impression on these people. I'll be living with them for the next seven years, after all.

Eventually, I managed to nudge my way to an empty seat, one right next to the boy who was the very reason I decided to be sorted into Gryffindor.

"Hullo, Neville!" I greeted the boy with the same friendly smile I've used on everyone else. Neville stared at me in shock, like he couldn't believe I was talking to him. With what I've seen of him so far, I'm not surprised. The boy doesn't seem to think much of himself. At least he managed to snap out of his stupor quickly.

"Oh! Um, erm, hullo, Harry."

I wanted to say more, engage the boy in conversation so I can determine the best method of earning his allegiance, but Professor McGonagall decided to restart the sorting ceremony and called up another first year. I payed close attention to everyone who was sorted, putting each name to a face and memorizing which house they went to.

"Weasley, Ronald!"

I watched the red haired boy sit down on the stool and the hat cover his

head, drooping down to his ears. My mind went back to our first encounter on the Hogwarts Express. Truth be told, I still wasn't quite sure what to think of that meeting. It really left a bad taste in my mouth. But I also couldn't deny that I overreacted. Perhaps I should apologize to him later on? While I have no intention of being friends with him, I also don't want to alienate anyone who may prove potentially useful.

"HUFFLEPUFF!"

I blinked in surprise as the youngest Weasley was sorted into the House of Badgers. I watched the boy's face turn redder than his hair as he yanked the hat off his head and nearly threw it away, before angrily stomping to the Hufflepuff table. None of the Hufflepuff's clapped, probably because of the angry look in his eyes, and Ron, ignoring them, shoved himself into a seat with an almost audible growl.

I shake my head and focused my attention away from the boy. My eyes scanned the Gryffindor table. All of the other Weasley's are there, and from my understanding, the Weasley's have been consistently Gryffindor for many many years. Much as certain children from darker pureblood families like the Blacks are almost always consistently Slytherin, it was tradition for certain families to always be Gryffindor.

Then again, Sirius Black was a Gryffindor, so it's not like traditions couldn't be broken.

The three other Weasley children looked most disappointed to see one of their own being Sorted into another House. Percy looked mournful, as if someone had just told him he was no longer a prefect. The twins were shaking their heads pityingly.

"A real shame about our dear brother's Sorting, right Fred?"

"Too right, George. I am most disappointed to see Ronikens being Sorted into the House of Cowards. Then again, he always has been easily intimidated by us."

"Well, we did turn his teddy bear into a spider when he was younger. Maybe it's our fault he got Sorted into Hufflepuff?"

"Nah!" They both finished together.

I frowned as I heard the slight dig on Hufflepuff. It was one thing to hear from Andromeda how everyone thought Hufflepuff was the house of duffers, cowards and left overs, but it was quite another to hear two students talking about the same thing. Was this truly how everyone saw that house? It almost made him wish he could take back his decision and get sorted there just so they could have some claim to fame.

The only other person I took a personal interest in was Blaise Zabini, who got sorted into Slytherin. My eyes trailed the dark-skinned boy as he sat down next to Tracey and Daphne, the former gave the boy a dazzling smile and a pat on the back while the latter settled for a nod. Blaise seemed to take both gestures with poise. He was very in control of himself, I noted. He would make a good ally.

All attention was diverted when Albus Dumbledore stood to his feet. The man was giving a wide, beaming smile, as if just seeing them all sitting there, chattering excitedly, was enough to make him the happiest man alive.

He spread his arms out wide in a grand, welcoming gesture. I thought it made him like Gandalf trying his hand at conducting an orchestra, what with the hair and beard.

"Welcome!" His voice boomed out, every bit as grand as his gestures. "Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit. Blubber. Oddment. Tweak. Thank you!"

While everyone else clapped, I found myself staring at the man with furrowed brows. The headmaster seemed a bit off to me. He reminded me of those animals who look completely harmless, but can be incredibly deadly when you get to close. It made me wonder how much of that 'mad hatter' act was just an act. Or if it was even an act at all.

"He seems to be a bit off his rocker, doesn't he?" I commented to Neville, who looked at me with wide eyes. Maybe he was just surprised I had so blatantly insulted the headmaster by calling him crazy.

"Well, I guess," Neville muttered unsurely. I frowned at the boy. He seemed so unsure of himself. Was this really the heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Longbottom? "My Gran always told me Dumbledore is one of the most powerful wizards in the world, but that he's always been a tad... erm, eccentric?"

"I suppose that's a good word to describe him," I concurred. Eccentric definitely described Dumbledore well, from what I had seen so far. Most geniuses are like that. Being so mad is what also makes them so brilliant, or at least that's how it is in some of the fiction novels I've read.

My mind was brought out of my reverie when a delectable scent invaded my nose. I turned my head to see a veritable feast sitting on the once empty dishes on the table. There was a lot more variety than I had ever seen; roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, fries, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, peppermint humbugs. Most of the food I noticed consisted of meat. And as I piled food onto my plate, I wondered if I could somehow convince the chefs here to make some foreign foods. I've always had a thing for Italian and French foods.

As I began to eat my meal with the poise and grace Andromeda instilled into me, a ghost floated toward where Neville and I were sitting.

"Oh but that does look good," he said sadly, and I could have sworn drool was coming out of his mouth.

"I take it ghosts aren't able to eat?" It was something of a stupid question, but I couldn't keep myself from asking. I was curious, and this was the first time I had ever had the chance to speak with a spirit.

"I haven't eaten for nearly four-hundred years," said the ghost. "I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it. I don't think I've introduced myself? Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington at your service. Resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower."

"Four-hundred years is an awfully long time," I murmured, trying to imagine what it would feel like to be a ghost for that long. I couldn't, or maybe I simply didn't want to. The idea of being a disembodied spirit,

incapable of interacting physically with the rest of the world but always there in the background bothered me more than I cared to admit. I changed the subject. "How did you become a ghost?"

"Ah, well, you see, I was wandering through a park one night, when I ran into Lady Grieve, a lady-in-waiting in King Henry's court. She was so confident that I could straighten her crooked teeth that I simply couldn't say no. As it turns out, I couldn't straighten her teeth. My efforts backfired. She grew tusks, and I was executed the following morning by an improper decapitation."

I raised an eyebrow at the story. I knew about King Henry VII who had seized the crown in 1485, but I did not know this tidbit of information. Then again, it was probably something the wizards at the time had tried to cover up.

"What do you mean 'improper decapitation?'" I asked.

In response to my question, Nicholas grabbed his head and yanked on it. Many people 'ewwed' as flesh muscle and bone parted from each other until the man's head was hanging to his neck by a small sinew of flesh. I found myself blinking as I got a perfect view of the third cervical bone in the spine and the meaty muscles around it. It was a very grim and disgusting sight.

"That's why we call him 'Nearly Headless Nick,'" one of the twins said. Fred, I believe.

"I prefer to be called Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington," Nicholas said haughtily. I got the feeling this was a very sore subject for him. That nickname was probably something he had been dealing with for hundreds of years. I actually felt kind of sorry for him.

He perked up a moment later, thankfully, and coughed into his hand.

"So—new Gryffindors! I hope you're going to help us win the house championship this year? Gryffindors have never gone so long without winning. Slytherins have got the cup six years in a row! The Bloody Baron's becoming almost unbearable—he's the Slytherin ghost."

I turned my eyes towards the Slytherin table and saw the ghost in question. He had blank eyes, a gaunt face, and his robes were stained silver with blood. I wondered at this. Was that his own blood or someone else's? The ghost was sitting right next to Malfoy, who looked incredibly uncomfortable by the ghost's proximity.

"How did he get covered in blood?" asked Seamus with great interest.

"I've never asked," said Nearly Headless Nick delicately.

Once everyone had finished eating, the plates cleaned themselves to a sparkling shine, as if they had never been dirtied in the first place. I was impressed. The magic didn't look like much compared to some of the things I had heard of, but it would be incredibly useful to learn. It would also save me time when I cleaned the dishes at the Dursley's.

A moment later desserts appeared on the table. Blocks of ice cream in every flavor you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate eclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, Jell-O, rice pudding and many other flavours I had never heard of. I took some of the treacle tart and began pondering the intricacies of the magic they used to summon the food here, trying to come up with a viable theory for how such a summoning would work.

While I began making theories on magically creating a wormhole within the fabrics of reality to summon food through, the other students began talking about their families.

"I'm half-and-half," said Seamus. "Me dad's a Muggle. Mom didn't tell him she was a witch 'til after they were married. Bit of a nasty shock for him."

The others laughed.

What about you, Neville?" I asked politely.

"Well, my gran brought me up and she's a witch," said Neville, "but the family thought I was all- Muggle for ages. My Great Uncle Algie kept trying to catch me off my guard and force some magic out of me—he pushed me off the end of Blackpool pier once, I nearly drowned—but nothing happened until I was eight. Great Uncle Algie came round for

dinner, and he was hanging me out of an upstairs window by the ankles when my Great Auntie Enid offered him a meringue and he accidentally let go. But I bounced—all the way down the garden and into the road. They were all really pleased, Gran was crying, she was so happy. And you should have seen their faces when I got in here—they thought I might not be magic enough to come, you see. Great Uncle Algie was so pleased he bought me my toad."

"Are you telling me that you call uncle attempted to force the magic out of you via attempted murder?" I asked in a soft, dangerous voice. I tried keeping my emotions under control, and I think I succeeded, for the most part, but I know I couldn't control everything, not when I felt such anger at someone attempting to kill their family in some misguided attempt to force magic out of them. Maybe it was just because of how my relatives had tried to stamp the magic out of me, or maybe it was because of my preconceived notions of how family should behave with each other, but the thought that someone could harm a child for such a mundane reason pissed me off to know end.

The others must have sensed my change in mood, because Neville, Seamus, and Dean all leaned backwards slightly.

"W-Well, it's not like I was hurt or anything," Neville stuttered out, and I realized that I may not have been as successful as keeping the rage out of my voice as I thought. I frowned. It seemed I was slipping.

"Sorry, Neville," I told him, and everyone else, "I didn't mean to frighten you or anything. I just don't like that someone would willingly put you in harms way to try and force magic out of you. That's no way to treat family." I was being honest too. I had always believed that family should be held in the highest regard and treated with love and respect. And while I did not consider the Dursleys to be my family, I did consider Lisa to be my family, and I always tried to treat her well, even if I acted a little distant at times.

"No, it's fine," Neville said. He seemed pleased by my words, almost uncomfortably so. I got the feeling no one had ever stuck up for him before. Hmm... maybe that could be my ticket to gaining his allegiance. "Thank you."

I gave him a friendly smile.

"You're welcome."

Conversation flowed by and I let myself be swept into it. I kept my ears open and listened to everyone else as they spoke, even adding a few comments myself, but my body was pretty much running on auto-pilot. I didn't need to pay full attention to remember everything that went on around me. It was one of the many benefits of having eidetic memory.

I let my eyes scan the other tables, searching for those I felt would make the best allies. Susan and Hannah were sitting next to Sally-Ann Perks and Megan Jones, talking animatedly. Well, Hannah was talking, Susan was listening with a small smile. At the Slytherin table Tracey, Blaise and Daphne were all sitting together. I noticed that while they were sitting with the other first years, they seemed to be a separate entity from most of them. Only Lilith Moon, a dark-haired girl with green eyes, pale skin and a few freckles on her nose seemed to be separate from Draco Malfoy and his ilk like the other three. I got the feeling she was a bit of a loner.

My eyes wandered over the Ravenclaw table. I didn't know anyone in that house, so I couldn't make a well-judged decision on who to ally with from their yet. I studied a few of the first years for a moment, before moving on.

Over at the staff table I could see Albus Dumbledore speaking to Professor McGonagall about something, and Hagrid was drinking from a large cup. I tried to put a name to the faces I could see based on my mother's descriptions in her journal. I recognized Professor's Flitwick and Sprout, the Head of House Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff respectively. My mind could also place the school nurse, Madam Pomfrey, but many of the others I did not recognize. They must have come after my parents graduated.

One person I did recognize was Severus Snape. My mother's former best friend. He looked a lot like her journals described him as, only more angry and bitter. His face seemed to be set in a constant sneer, like he had just gotten so used to sneering all the time that it became permanently stuck on his face. He sat next to a man I did not recognize

wearing a purple turban.

As if sensing my eyes on him, Snape turned and his sneer seemed to deepen. At the same time I sensed a burst of intense pain in my scar. I ignored it, having felt much worse, and simply let my eyes move away from the greasy-haired man's loathsome gaze and continue studying the other teachers.

The desserts soon disappeared in the same manner as dinner, and Professor Dumbledore rose to his feet again. The hall fell silent, and Harry found himself impressed. Despite looking like a frail old man, he obviously commanded a lot of respect.

"Ahem—just a few more words now that we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you."

"First years should note that the forest on the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins.

"I have also been asked by Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used between classes in the corridors."

"Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of the term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch."

"And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to everyone who does not wish to die a very painful death."

A few people laughed at the declaration. I did not. My eyes narrowed. I wondered if he was being serious, and if so, why was something apparently dangerous enough to cause death even in this school in the first place?

"And now, before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried

Dumbledore. I noticed almost immediately that the eyes of the other teacher's had become fixed. Clearly, this was not something they enjoyed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick, as if he was trying to get a fly off the end, and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself, snakelike, into words.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!"

What followed next was quite possibly the most god awful singing I had ever heard in my life, and when I considered how bad Lisa was at singing, that was truly saying something. I loved the girl like a sister, but by the gods her voice could shatter glass. This was worse, much worse. Everyone singing was doing so to a completely different rhythm, they were all off beat, off key, off tune. It was utterly horrendous, and I was extremely aggravated to know that this memory was going to be branded into my mind for life.

I decided then and there that next year I would bring ear plugs, or learn a silencing charm.

When everyone had finished, with the Weasley twins being the last having sang a slow, funeral song, Professor Dumbledore smiled and wiped his eyes.

"Ah, music, a magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

I stood up with the rest of the school and began following Percy with the other first years as we made our way to where we would be spending the next seven years. As I did though, my mind went back to what Dumbledore said about the third floor corridor. Something was there, hidden. Something dangerous. And I couldn't help but wonder what that something was, as well as why Dumbledore thought it was a good idea to hide whatever it was in a school full of children.

XoX

"So it's true then? You really did kill that troll?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably as Tracey looked at him in awe. He wasn't sure he liked the look she was giving him. He had come to terms with the fact that he had killed, had come to realize that what happened had been completely unavoidable, but that didn't mean he was comfortable with it. Still, he couldn't quite blame her for being amazed by what she perceived to be an incredible feat of magical prowess. She was not there, and she had not seen just how gruesome it had been.

"Yes," he said simply, hoping she would drop the subject. It was a false hope, he knew. Tracey was not the kind of girl to just let something like this go.

As if she trying to prove his point, Tracey let loose a loud groan of disappointment.

"Man, I can't believe I missed it!"

"Honestly," Harry looked over at the brunette, "I'm very glad you and Blaise were not there." For multiple reasons, if he were honest. He didn't want anymore people being exposed to the grisly scene that had been the troll's head exploding like an overripe grapefruit.

The brown haired girl gave him a curious look.

"Why not?"

"Because if you two had been there, then I would have had two more people to worry about."

The five who had been present during the troll incident flinched at the reminder. Harry closed his eyes, trying to stem the tide of guilt. Yes, his friends had been reckless, but he had been just as reckless, just as stupid. He could admit this. While he may have had a better chance at surviving an encounter with a troll than any other first year, it did not change the fact that he was still a first year.

"That troll was incredibly strong. It's hide was thick and had a lot of magical resistance. All but the most powerful of spells would not have worked on it, and even if you two had been there to combine spells with the others, we only know up to the first year defense spells, none of

which pack enough power to do more than annoy it."

That had been the main reason Harry had been at such a loss at what to do. Even when he had pumped as much power as possible into his spells they hadn't even grazed its flesh. He probably could have shot it in the eye, that might have worked, but that could have also exacerbated the problem. The last thing he wanted to deal with was an extremely powerful magical creature in an enraged berserker state.

"We managed to escape that night with our lives due to luck and nothing else," Harry stated confidently. "If another variable had been added, say, two more people to enrage the troll further, it's quite possible all of us would have died that night." He looked over at the now pale Tracey, his eyes unconsciously softening ever so slightly. "And if that had happened I would have never forgiven myself. You guys are my friends, and I don't want to see anything bad happen to you."

It was almost amazing how quickly his feelings for these seven came into being. Lisa had taken several months before his heart opened up to her, several months of following him around despite telling her to get lost, several months of talking to him like he was her best friend. Several months of him being a complete jerk and ignoring her. These seven had done in two months what had taken Lisa more than twice that length of time to accomplish.

Perhaps he shouldn't be so surprised. Unlike with Lisa, who he had patently ignored until he gave into her demands, he had actually tried to befriend his friends at Hogwarts from the very start. This time it had not been them who initiated the relationship, but him. And maybe, just maybe, that made all the difference. Spending so much time with these people, getting to know them, letting them into his life in ways not even Lisa could no matter how much he wished it could be otherwise. Was it any wonder he had come to like them so much?

"Ah." Blood rushed to Tracey's face, turning it the same color as a Weasley's hair. She looked away and mumbled a soft, "thank you," before trying to get back to work. Harry frowned, but guessed he couldn't rightly blame her for her sudden shyness. She was probably just embarrassed.

He decided to save her from embarrassment and changed the subject.

"Has Daphne given any thought on joining us during these study sessions?"

Tracey shook her head, her shoulders slumping.

"No," she sighed, "I've asked her if she wanted to come several times, and each time she says no each time." She shook her head. "I even tried pointing out how much her grades could improve if she came with us. She might be consistently near the top, especially in Charms and Potions, but some of her other grades are nowhere near as good as they could be. Yet she still refused."

Harry frowned. He had hoped that Tracey would be able to convince her friend to come with her to at least one of these study sessions. It seemed the girl was adamant on being obstinate. And, most unfortunately, Harry did not know what to do to gain her friendship.

"I suppose the only thing we can do is wait and hope." Harry paused, then cast Tracey a look. "And you won't tell me why she refuses to spend any time with us?"

Tracey shook her head.

"Can't."

"Won't," Harry corrected with a smile. "You could tell me if you truly wished to, but won't because you'd be betraying your friend, and I respect that. I don't know anything about Daphne, but it's clear she doesn't trust easily. That she trusts you obviously means you're very important to her. It would be incredibly cold-hearted to betray her trust, and I won't force you to do that."

"Thank you," Tracey murmured softly, her smile much smaller than the normal ones she gave. More heartfelt. Harry offered her one last smile, before turning his attention to Lisa, who asked him to look over her Transfiguration Essay.

Harry leaned over Lisa's shoulder and began to carefully read over her

work. Her writing was very meticulous and neat. Very small too. Much like he had expected from anyone in Ravenclaw, she tried to cram as much information as possible with the amount of length given for each essay.

"There are a few errors in this. Firstly, you need to remember that the transformation in any Transfiguration is directly influenced by several factors. The weight of the item you are transfiguring. How many abnormalities its body has. The amount of power you place into your spell. How hard you concentrate on the spell. And a fifth unknown variable."

He paused, allowing himself a breath and Lisa a moment to scribble down the corrections in her essay.

"Think of it like this, you need to know how much an item weighs compared to what you want to turn it into, and whether or not this item has any disfigurations or imperfections that may effect your transformation. These two factors will directly effect the other two. If the item you are using weighs more than the item you're trying to transform it into, then you need to use less power and more concentration. By that same token, if the item you are using weighs less than the item you are trying to transform it into, you will need to use more power and less concentration."

"What do you mean concentrate less?" asked Lisa, frowning as she wrote a bit more. "I would think if you were using more power you'd want to concentrate on the transformation more."

"Most people would assume that. The thing about using magic is that when you use a lot of it, it's very hard to control. Many people believe that means you need to concentrate on your spell more, but the truth of the matter is that focusing on your magic too much is like lighting a bottle of nitrogen on fire. Magic is a very chaotic form of energy, very volatile. And the more you use, the harder it is for you to control. Think of it as trying to contain water in a cup. Your magic would be the water, the cup is the spell, and your wand is the faucet that opens the gates for the water to flow and directs it into the cup."

"Only instead of water we're dealing with a highly unstable power that

could blow up in our face if we're not careful," Lisa caught on quickly.

"Exactly," Harry said with a smile. "I think you believe that concentration is the same as imagery, that is to say, you believe that imagining what you're trying to transform your object into and the amount of detail you put into it is the concentration variable when it comes to Transfiguration, yes?"

He waited for Lisa to nod before continuing.

"Which is not actually true. The variable known as concentration only constitutes the amount of concentration you place on the spell itself, the transformation, not the image you are picturing in your mind when you focus on the transformation. The image you conjure in your mind is actually the fifth variable. The concentration is merely the amount of effort you are placing into the spell."

With a flick of his wrist, Harry summoned his wand. Another flick conjured a small red ball on the table in front of them.

"The best way I can think of it is will. How much of your will are you trying to enforce on the object you are transforming. In some cases, you may need to place more or less of your will, your focus, on the object. This is directly dependent on the weight."

A flick of his wrist and the ball became a baseball bat of about the same size. Another flick and it was back to a ball, then broom, then a chair, all about the same size as the original ball.

"A bat, a broom, a chair, they all weigh more than a ball, even if they are the same size due to the materials they're made out of, so you need to focus less of your will on it. Magic generally has a will of its own, and it will change the weight of the object for you, therefore, you don't need to use as much of your own will to effect that change. You just need to add more power and gently coax the magic into doing what you want."

"But if the object weighs less I need to use less power and enforce more of my will on it," Lisa showed that she belonged in Ravenclaw by catching on very quickly. "Because I am not using as much magic, I need to enforce more of my will on it to direct it. In other words, concentration."

"Exactly!" Harry beamed at the girl, causing her to flush.

"That... that makes a lot of sense." Lisa hurriedly turned back to her essay to get her blush under control. She scribbled in her neat, tidy scrawl for several seconds, before turning to Harry with a thankful smile. "Thank you, that explanation is much better than the one my *sister* gave me when I tried asking for her help."

"Having family problems?" asked Harry, bemused.

"You don't know the half of it," Lisa groaned in response. "Ever since she found out I'm friends with you, she's been bugging me to introduce her to you."

"She's a seventh year, right?" asked Harry.

"Yes," Lisa huffed, "and she's really annoying. Always bothering me about something or other. Always complaining to our parents. I swear, sometimes it's like I'm the older sibling while she's the younger one."

"I think I understand how you feel, at least a little bit," Harry said sympathetically. "My muggle friend, Lisa Crawft, is older than me, but most of the time I feel like I'm the older one. Of course, our age isn't that far apart. A few months at most."

"Trust me. You may think the situation is similar, but it's really not," Lisa declared adamantly. "Try imagining a seventeen year-old girl whining to you about how your friends with the Boy-Who-Lived while she's not. Or having her complain to your parents about how they bought you a skirt she's been wanting for ages, and then throwing a fit when she doesn't get it." She shook her head. "If she weren't so smart, I doubt she'd be in Ravenclaw."

Harry nodded absently.

"So your sister is interested in seeing me?"

"Obsessed is more like it," Lisa grumbled in complaint, "Every time I see her these days it's always 'I can't believe you're friends with the Boy-Who-Lived' or 'when are you going to introduce me to Harry Potter' or

something equally annoying."

A small grin crossed Harry's face.

"Is that why you spend so much time with us?" he teased, "To avoid your sister?"

Lisa smiled and held up her left hand, spacing her thumb and forefinger barely a centimeter apart from each other.

"Maybe a little."

"I personally think you're lucky that the only problem you have with your sister is that she is annoying," Blaise commented almost absently as he scratched a few notes on his parchment. "My sister's a mental case. I swear, sometimes I really wonder about her."

"I didn't know you had a sister," Harry said with a frown.

"She's already graduated from Hogwarts," Blaise explained.

"Yeah, and now she's learning from his mum about how best to seduce a man," Tracey quipped glibly, earning her a small glare from her dark-skinned friend. The young brunette just responded with a dazzling smile.

"I do remember hearing something about that." Harry idly twirled his wand in his hand. "Not about your sister of course, but about your mum. Didn't she earn the nickname, the Black Widow in certain pureblood circles due to her marrying several men and all of them dying under mysterious circumstances."

Blaise shifted. Emotion finally played on his face. He shifted, clearly uncomfortable about where this conversation was going.

"Weren't we talking about Lisa's older sister?" he asked, trying to redirect the subject.

"We were." Tracey nodded her head, the smile on her face still in place. "But then you mentioned your sister, so really, you only have yourself to blame. Besides, it's not like you really care what we say about her. You

don't even like your sister anyway. You just admitted she's a mental case."

"It's not you talking about my sister that bother's me," Blaise mumbled just loud enough for Harry to hear. Perhaps it was time to change the subject.

Turning to Lisa, Harry asked, "so do you have anymore questions about Transfiguration?"

"I have one," Susan said. Harry turned to her and raised an eyebrow. The young redhead had been a bit more talkative since the troll incident. A bit more assertive. He wondered if it had something to do with her outburst the day after, but didn't think it mattered in the end. In his mind, this change could only be a good thing.

Nodding, he gave her the go ahead to continue.

"You mentioned a fifth unknown variable. Do you know what it is?"

Harry rubbed his chin for a second, pondering.

"The fifth variable is considered an unknown because the variable itself is always changing," he started with a small frown. "Professor McGonagall showed us the basic arithmetic equation that all Transfiguration uses. What she didn't mention was that the variable known as Z is actually another arithmetic formula that is subject to change based on many different factors."

Susan blinked.

"Oh."

"I wouldn't worry about the unknown variable right now," Harry said offhandedly. "We won't need to start worrying about it until fourth of fifth year when we get into cross-species transfiguration."

"So how do you know about it?" Terry asked, frowning as Susan went back to work on writing her potions essay.

"Easy, I studied ahead."

Terry raised an eyebrow.

"Up to fourth year?"

"Nothing wrong with looking ahead to see what will be coming up later on."

Everyone looked at Harry for several more seconds before shaking their heads.

"How is that you're not in Ravenclaw again?" Hannah asked curiously.

"What I want to know is where you find the time to read so far ahead," Tracey added. "In all the time Blaise and I have started studying with you guys, we've never seen you so much as pick up a book. Come to think of it," she tapped a forefinger to her chin and looked up at the ceiling, "I don't think I've ever seen you do your homework here either." She frowned. "You're always helping us."

"That's because Harry get's his homework done the same day we get it," Neville said. "He usually does it after class is finished and we've all gone to our respective common rooms. After that he reads."

Tracey gave Harry a deadpan look.

"So let me get this straight. You're on the Quidditch team as its new Seeker, the youngest in centuries I might add, you always finish your homework the day it's due, then you read for the rest of that time, and this is on top of the time you spend helping us with our work and classes." She shook her head. "Where do you find the time to do all this?"

Harry gave her a helpless shrug.

"I have a lot of energy."

Tracey gave him a pout, completely unsatisfied by the answer. He almost chuckled at the sight, and couldn't help but wonder if she actually wanted

him to extrapolate. He doubted it. The female Slytherin was not really into theory. She was intelligent, but preferred practical application over theoretical knowledge.

"E-Excuse me."

Heads turned, Harry's included, toward the source of the new voice. He was not surprised to find Hermione Granger standing before him, looking incredibly nervous. In truth, he had been expecting her to speak with him for some time now. Several times during class, he would see the bushy-haired witch looking at him, worrying her thumb and looking like she wanted to say something. He wondered if she had been gathering her courage to speak with him.

"Can we help you, Miss Granger?" asked Harry. Hermione winced at the very formal means to address her, but didn't protest.

"I was wondering if I could talk to you, Harry?" Her eyes focused on his, then flickered to her left, away from him.

"I don't see why not." Harry stood up and gestured for the girl to follow. She did, trailing slightly behind him as his friends watched them leave.

They walked through several isles of books cases in silence. Hermione fidgeted beside him, sending occasional glances his way, then turning her head. When they reached a more secluded spot, Harry turned to her.

"So, what did you want to talk about."

"I-I wanted to apologize," Hermione stuttered out nervously. Harry raised an eyebrow. "I've been extremely rude to you when you've never done anything to earn my contempt. You always tried to be nice and help me, but I kept turning you away and trying to upstage you in class. I'm sorry," she finished in a small voice.

"It's fine." Harry waved off her apology, causing the girl to look at him wide eyed. "Honestly, I'm not that surprised you acted like that. I get the feeling you're used to being at the top of your class."

Hermione blinked.

"Yes, that's right. How did you know?"

"You mean aside from that fact that you're always carrying a book around?" Harry asked dryly. Hermione had the good grace to blush. "It's just how you act. You're very studious. Every time we're in class you are the first one to raise your hand and you always have the correct answer. You're also one of the first to get the spell we're working on right."

"Not recently I'm not," Hermione muttered.

"Yes, but that's just because other people have accepted my help and you didn't," Harry said, earning a surprised look from Hermione. She probably thought he hadn't heard her last comment. "I also get the feeling that the reason you try so hard to be the best is because you don't have a lot of friends." Hermione flinched. "I imagine you were picked on for your intelligence as a child. You were probably very lonely, and so you found solace in books and getting good grades. They were your sanctuary, a place where you could immerse yourself in knowledge and forget about the world, for a little while at least. Am I right?"

"I... yes," Hermione's eyes, which already showed surprise had gone almost impossibly wide during Harry's tirade. "How did you... how could you know that?"

Harry gave her a mysterious smile and tapped his temple with his middle and index finger.

"Elementary my dear."

Hermione blinked. Then blinked again. Then she gave another for good measure. Her expression soon shifted from stunned to amused. Her lips twitching in a small smile.

"Sherlock Holmes fan, I take it?"

"I am a fan of many stories," Harry informed her, "but yes, Sherlock Holmes is one of my favorites."

Harry paused, then smiled.

"In either event, thank you for the apology. I accept, and hope that you won't deny my help when I give it."

"I won't." Hermione determined, before her expression shifted into one of shyness. "I also wanted to thank you for saving me from that troll the other day. Had you not found me, I..." she trailed off, shuddering as the realization of just how close she had come to death hit her.

"You're most welcome," Harry said solemnly.

An awkward silence ensued, for Hermione at least. The girl fidgeted, as if not sure whether to continue speaking or leave. Harry studied the girl intently as she looked down at her shoes, then back up at him, worrying her lower lip.

"Well," she started nervously, "well, I guess I should be leaving then..."

"Hermione," Harry said before she could turn around. The bushy-haired student looked at him, blinking. "Would you like to join my friends and I during our study sessions?"

Hermione blinked several times in rapid succession, as if her mind was trying to process what he meant. Then she gave him what had to be the most grateful smile he had ever seen.

"I would like that," she said softly.

XoX

Midnight arrived. The stars had come out, a sprinkling of tiny lights painted on a velvety black canvas overhead. Surrounded by the myriad of twinkling lights was the moon, whose beams of light shone through the many windows of the third floor corridor that Harry found himself walking through well after curfew.

Not that anyone could actually see him. He was currently invisible to the naked eye.

Though perhaps invisible was an overstatement. It wasn't as if he had actually become invisible, merely used the disillusionment charm to blend

in with his surroundings. His body had taken on the exact color as the stone walls and floor, his form was nothing more than a slight distortion only the keenest of eyes could spot. To further enhance the illusion of being invisible, as well as to make sure Ms. Norris couldn't sniff him out if she wandered near, he had added a scent deadening charm.

Truly, magic was a wonderful thing.

It had taken him a while to find the spells needed to sneak around Hogwarts undetected, and a little longer still to actually learn said spells. He'd been forced to put his Transfiguration studies on hold in order to learn them.

Harry moved through the corridor silently, his feet making little noise as he walked. He stopped in front of the very first door on the right. Something lay beyond this door. Harry could hear what sounded like heavy panting coming from the other side along with, growling and snuffling. It sounded like a dog, a very large dog. Or perhaps a really loud dog. What's more, the panting sounded like it was coming from more than one dog. Harry could make out three distinctly different pants, which he noticed due to how they were all slightly off rhythm with each other.

Creaking the door open just a smidgen, Harry carefully peaked inside. The creature standing in the center of the room was definitely a dog, though perhaps in its barest classification. It was large, easily ten times his size. Dark black fur covered its entire frame, blacker than the darkest of nights and blending in with the near pitch black darkness of the room. Paws almost as tall as Harry and with claws that looked like they could cut through steel were attached to powerful front and hind legs. A large tail hovered behind its back.

It also had three heads.

Cerberus. That was the name of the creature. Harry had never seen a Cerberus before, though he knew about them. It was said that they were the guardians of the Underworld, that all those trying to pass through Hade's realm would find themselves being viciously mauled and eaten by this creature.

So this was what Dumbledore had hidden up here. A Cerberus of all

things.

Harry slowly closed the door before the creature could notice him and made his way back towards his dorm, silently contemplative. What could Dumbledore possibly be thinking in bringing such a powerful and dangerous creature to Hogwarts? Honestly, as if the troll hadn't been bad enough now there was a large three-headed dog hidden inside of the school!

Rubbing his chin in thought, Harry contemplated this. There had to be a reason for Dumbledore allowing a Cerberus into Hogwarts. And he would bet all the money in his vaults that the reason had something to do with the trap door the beast was standing over.

Now all he had to do was find out what was so important that Dumbledore felt the need to bring a three-headed dog into a school full of children.

Should be a simple enough task.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. Before I leave you all so you can return to your lives, there one point I wish to clarify for you guys and girls.

Many reviewers have complained that my story is 'moving too slowly' for them. I believe the reason for this is because none of you have seemed to realize something very important about this story. I don't blame you, since I did not tell you, but I will tell you now so you can stop complaining. This story, Harry Potter and the Gift of Memories, only covers Harry's first year at Hogwarts. You can liken this story to Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. Like the original story written by JK Rowling, this story WILL end when the first year is over, and I will begin a new story in another fic as a sequel.

Now, I know what you're going to say 'JK Rowling's story is only 86,000+ words'. Well, I will tell you that JK Rowling's story is also a story written for children, and does not need to go into great detail because most children simply don't have the attention span

necessary to read a 100,000+ word story. Her stories don't begin catering to teenagers until the Goblet of Fire, which is 190,637 words. And rest assured, this story DOES cater to teenagers and young adults. So I would say my pacing is exactly as it should be.

Now that all of the unpleasantness is out of the way, I would like to thank those who have reviewed my story. If you have any questions, comments, critics, ego boosts, etc. etc. please leave them in a review and I will either get back to you or take your advice under advisement.

In Flight Crises

In Flight Crisis

Dinner at the Crawfts was an interesting affair. After knocking on the door and being greeted by an overly-enthusiastic Lisa, I was introduced to her parents. Mrs. Crawft, an older, calmer, infinitely more mature version of her daughter, acted every bit the ideal mother. Her father, on the other hand, was a gruff businessman, a consummate professional. Where Mrs. Crawft greeted me with the loveliest of smiles, Mr. Crawft greeted me with a stiff, "hullo."

We sat around the table, and I spoke with Mrs. Crawft who asked me a plethora of questions: how old was I. What did I like to do. Standard questions. I answered to the best of my ability.

"What are your intentions towards my daughter?" asked a gruff and, dare I say it, angry Mr. Crawft. I wasn't sure how to answer him. Thankfully, I didn't have to.

"Now dear," Mrs. Crawft gave her husband a smile laced with poisoned sweetness. "I thought we already had this conversation. Harry and Lisa are quite young. I doubt he has any intentions toward our daughter. You promised me that you wouldn't harass him."

Mr. Crawft Grunted, but remained silent and continued eating. I stared at the parents, confused, before leaning over to Lisa and whispering, "do you know what they're talking about?"

Lisa cupped a hand to her mouth and whispered back. "Not a clue."

After dinner Lisa directed me to the living room, a spacious interior with a carpeted floor, a large sofa, two comfy chairs, a coffee table and a television. She bade me to sit on the couch and asked me what I wanted to watch.

I chose Star Wars.

We sat on the sofa, watching text roll down the screen as the opening theme to my favorite space opera blared in our ears.

"Hey, um, Harry?" Lisa asked, her voice soft, almost unnoticeable over the din of music.

"Yes, Lisa?"

Lisa fidgeted in her seat. "I wanted to thank you... for coming over, I mean." Fidget. Her cheeks began burning red. "It really means a lot to me."

I turned to look at her. Upon being caught under my gaze, Lisa flushed and looked away. How odd. Normally she's determined and vibrant to the point of being pushy, yet now she's acting shy. Weird.

I felt a smile crawl on my face, unbidden.

"You're welcome," I said softly, then looked away and added, "thank you for inviting me over. This was... fun."

Lisa looked surprised for a moment, before a smile broke out on her face.

"You're welcome," she whispered, turning back to watch the movie.

XoX

As November hit the weather became incredibly cold. Frigid. Ice seemed to hang in the air and invade the lungs, causing not only mist to rise from each blown out breath, but a sharp, minty coldness to seep into ones chest with each intake of breath. Windows fogged over, not even the warming charms that kept most of the castle at a mild temperature could get rid of it. Harry wondered if perhaps they had been designed that way on purpose to give the school an authentic Scottish winter look, but disregarded the theory soon after. The ground had become covered in a thick sleet of frost. It wouldn't be long now before the snow started to fall.

The first Quidditch game was only a few days away, on a Saturday. After a little over a month of training, Harry would be playing in his first ever Quidditch match: Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. It was a much anticipated

game, perhaps more so than any other due to the animosity between the two houses. It could also have something to do with him being the youngest Seeker in the past century and the Boy-Who-Lived, but that was practically a given.

There was only one problem, Harry's broom hadn't come in. He had sent the message to Andromeda the day after he had earned his place as the Gryffindor Seeker, and had received a reply that she would do as he asked. Yet a month had gone by with no word from Andromeda. He was beginning to get worried. Oliver was also getting antsy, which made everyone else on the team paranoid. It was almost like a vicious circle.

A frown crossed Harry's face as he continued his training. Despite how Oliver had forced them to do extra training to prepare them for their first game, it did not mean he had slacked off in his own physical training regime. 200 push-ups with his feet planted against the wall so that he was working at a 45-degree angle, followed by 200 normal push-ups, then 200 more with his hands placed in a triangle directly in front of his face. After that he would do some core work outs, followed by stretches, then shadow sparring.

That was probably the one downfall to being at a boarding school for magic for nine months, Harry reflected ruefully. Much as he loved it here, none of the witches or wizards knew anything about hand-to-hand combat, thus he had no sparring partners to practice with. Shadow sparring only got you so far, and Harry had no doubt that when he got back home Master Wei was going to rip him apart the first chance he got.

By the time he finished, Harry had worked up a decent sweat despite no longer being able to do his daily run. Even though he knew the warming charm to keep him warm when outside, he knew no spell that could get rid of the slippery sheet of ice that covered the ground. And he did not fancy falling on his rear end every time he tried to push himself to his limits during his runs.

Heading up to his common room, Harry took a nice, long shower, got himself dressed to start the day, then pulled out a book on dueling and began reading as he waited for his friends to wake up. He had actually advanced decently far in his spell work as far as offensive spells went.

He didn't know many true, but those few spells he did know had become second nature to cast. He was currently working on silent casting, which for some reason was a lot harder for combat magic than it was for other spells.

Harry believed it had something to do with the spells effect and how you had to make non-verbal verbalized commands. Whenever Harry cast a spell for a charm or a transfiguration, he just had to picture the effect in his mind and his magic took care of the rest. Combat spells were executed much differently. Rather than picture the effect you had to make the verbal commands nonverbal and time your magic and wand motions with the command. This was because picturing the effect happening would just take too long, there was simply too much detail; the spell as it was launched, hitting your enemy, and what effect it had on your opponent. Not even a computer capable of processing data at light speeds would be capable making that a viable means for combat.

Which was why the caster had to non-verbalize verbal spells when dueling. It sounded easy in theory, but was intensely difficult in execution, requiring not only an incredible amount of mental discipline, but also a strong will and a lot of practice. Most adult witches and wizards couldn't cast non-verbal spells. So far, Harry only had one spell he could cast silently five out of five times, and that was after two weeks of practice.

One of the many aspects of dueling Harry was interested in eventually mastering was spell-chaining. As the name of the technique stated, it was the act of chaining a set of spells together in such a way that the caster did not have to pause in between spells each time he cast. In order to chain two spells together it required the one casting the spells to cast a spell where the last wand motion of the first spell can flow into the second without the need for a pause in between. For example, one cannot chain the *Expelliarmus*, the Disarming Charm, and the *Stupify*, a Stunning Charm, together, because both spells require the caster to point their wand at their target. On the other hand, the Disarming Charm can be combined with the *Diffindo*, the Cutting Curse, or the Jelly-Legs Jinx, *Locomotor Wibbly*, because the wand movements are not only different, but can flow into each other seamlessly. A point, and then a slash.

Harry had yet to actually practice spell-chaining because he only knew

six offensive spells, but he at least knew of several ways to chain the spells together, and would begin practicing later on when he got more combative spells under his belt.

The sound of footsteps let him know that someone was coming into the common room. He flipped a page of his book as he listened to the footsteps. They were light, steady and in slightly off rhythm. Harry quickly discovered who was walking towards him.

"Good morning, Hermione," Harry greeted casually as he deliberately closed and shrunk the book before putting it away in his pocket.

The walking stopped, and Harry turned to see Hermione blinking at him.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked.

Harry smiled.

"You have a very distinctive walk."

Hermione huffed and crossed her arms.

"That doesn't tell me anything."

"Of course it does," Harry stood up and stretched his arms above his head, the fabrics of his robes bunching around his shoulders. "You just haven't realized it yet."

Hermione's lips became a thin line and her brows furrowed. No doubt she was trying to puzzle out how Harry knew it was her from her walk. He wondered how long it would take her to figure out.

A few seconds later Neville walked down the stairway.

"Morning, you two," he gave his good morning as he walked up to them.

"Morning, Neville," Hermione replied absently, still trying to figure out how Harry could tell who she was just from her footsteps. Harry chuckled.

"Hullo, Nev."

The three made their way out of the Gryffindor Common Room and began walking down the many corridors towards the Great Hall, their feet making a dull thud against the stone floor. Several portraits greeted the trio, and Harry replied galely with a wave and a good morning. Neville shook his head, amused.

"Hey, Harry," he started, "I've been wondering this for a while now, but just what do you do so early in the morning? Surely you can't be reading the whole time?"

Harry smiled. He had wondered when someone would actually asked what he did in the mornings. Honesty though, he thought Hermione would be the one to ask him.

"You're right, I don't read the whole time," the raven haired boy admitted, "In fact, most of my time in the morning is spent exercising."

Neville's look turned curious.

"Exercising?"

"Yes," Harry nodded, "ever since I was six, I've been learning martial arts from my teacher, Master Wei, and in order to learn properly I need to be in peak physical condition."

"Martial Arts?" Neville asked, blinking.

"He means hand-to-hand combat," Hermione informed Neville, speaking up for the first time since Harry's comment about recognizing her via her footsteps. "It's a form of muggle fighting using fists and feet. Many people believe it to be the first form of fighting conceived by man as it did not require a weapon to learn."

Neville looked strangely at Hermione's dissertation, but eventually shrugged and looked back at Harry.

"So you exercise because of your muggle hand-to-hand fighting?"

"Partially." Harry rubbed the left side of his neck. "But I also do it because I like to keep in shape. A healthy body is essential to a healthy life. It's

also a well founded theory that people who are healthier are generally happier and more self-assured. At least, that's what I've come to believe."

There was actually an entire scientific theory that had been proposed on why healthy people who exercised and played sports were happier than others. Physical exertion released endorphins, and endorphins made people feel good, made them happy. So people who exercised and played sports on a regular basis had endorphins released more regularly and were therefore happier people. He didn't mention this, as it would likely fly over Neville's head, and he didn't want Hermione to begin discussing theory with him, interesting as that would be.

Neville was silent for a moment, his look telling Harry that the boy was pondering his words.

"Do you think..." he paused, "do you think it would be alright if I joined you while you exercise?"

"That would depend," Harry cast a glance over at Neville, "I get up awfully early. Do you think you would be willing to wake up to join me?"

"I might need some help with that," Neville admitted, blushing. Harry nodded. Neville was a heavy sleeper.

"Then so long as you are willing to put in the effort, I am willing to let you join me."

Neville smiled gratefully as they entered the Great Hall. Already a number of students were sitting down for breakfast. Harry could see Lisa, Terry, Hannah, and Susan sitting down at the Hufflepuff table already.

Another thing he noticed was that Professor Dumbledore was also sitting at the head table for breakfast. An odd thing, since Dumbledore had never been seen during breakfasts before. Dinner, yes, occasionally, but never breakfast. Harry wondered why the man was here, but figured he would learn eventually, so he put it out of his mind.

He, along with Neville and a once again silent Hermione in tow, made their way to their friends.

"Did you hear how Harry killed that troll?"

"I heard he used a really powerful spell to blow it to pieces."

"Really? I heard he through it out of one of the second story windows."

Harry did not allow the conversations going on around him to bother him. They had been happening ever since he had killed that troll. The only thing he did do was take careful note to see which ones were continuing to look at him in fear. Thankfully, there were only a few left. Since there had been no perpetuation of violence on his part since the troll incident, most people had just decided that him killing a troll was some kind of noble act designed to protect the school. Harry had no intention of dissuading them of that illusion.

As he sat down, greeting his friends and receiving greetings in turn, Harry let his eyes drift to the Slytherin table. He immediately locked onto the form of the three individuals that he had befriended. He had been hoping to convince his Slytherin friends to sit with them at breakfast, lunch and dinner, but so far had not been able to bring the subject up.

The reason, of course, was due to how Daphne Greengrass still refused to have anything to do with him. He wasn't sure why she was so adamant on keeping her distance, but it was very unfortunate, both because it hindered his plans and because he really did want his friends to sit with him.

Looking at the trio of Slytherins, Harry saw that they were being very quiet. Even the normally talkative Tracey was silent. He frowned. It was not hard to see the worried look on Tracey's face. Blaise was harder to read, but by now Harry could claim to have gotten a decent enough grasp on how the boy worked to tell he was unnerved by something as well. And it was not hard to figure out why.

Or more specifically, who. Daphne Greengrass was not looking like her usual self. The cold indifference was still there. Her icy chips of blue were the same as always. The difference came in her posture. Her shoulders and back, normally set perfectly straight were slumped. Harry even noticed the bags under her eyes. Hardly noticeable. He guessed she was covering them with make up, but Harry could easily tell the difference

between now and the first time they had met. She looked tired.

He contemplated this new change. Had something happened to her recently? Was she under some kind of duress? Perhaps a family matter? Whatever it was, it must be a grave matter. The girl had an extraordinarily well-crafted mask. For something to be capable of putting a crack in it meant it had to be a monumentally stressful matter.

With nary a sound or outward sign of his thoughts, Harry did his best to put the matter out of his mind. Until Daphne or one of her friends came to him for help, there was nothing he could do. Forcing the issue would only exacerbate the problem.

Piling on some eggs and a few bagels, Harry began to focus on his food and the conversations going on between his friends. He found himself talking to Terry about his upcoming Quidditch match.

"Are you worried?"

"Not really," Harry shrugged and put a fork full of eggs into his mouth with a thoughtful expression. He swallowed, then looked at Terry. "Woods has been training us a lot, and we've gone over several plays. He's particularly focused on the Slytherin team, since they're well established as cheaters. A lot of what we've been focusing on recently are learning what kind of dirty tricks they'll attempt to pull. I don't think there's anything the Slytherin team can do that we haven't already covered."

"The Slytherin team has been known to cheat a lot," Terry allowed, "I've heard tell from some of the older years that that's the only reason they've won the Quidditch Cup several years in a row." He shook his head.

"Personally I think it's a disgrace to Quidditch to cheat your way to victory. There's no sportsmanship in that."

"Tracey certainly agrees with that sentiment."

The two shared a bit of a chuckle over that. Tracey Davis' disgust with her own house team was well known to the friends. Several times already she had ranted about how repulsed she was that her own house team was being ruined by a bunch of overgrown troll's. Personally, Harry just thought she was upset that the Slytherin Captain, Flint, didn't allow

females on the team. She had complained many times about how sexist the Slytherin team was as well.

"Still, you're not worried at all?" asked Terry, getting his fifteen seconds of laughter under control, "you still haven't gotten a broom yet. Or have you?"

Harry grimaced.

"No, I still don't have a broom." He ran a hand through his hair. A nervous gesture. "To be honest, I would have thought that problem would have been solved by now, but I guess there are more problems than I thought."

"What were you trying to do?" the question came from Susan, who was sitting on his left. She looked at him curiously, her head tilted to the side.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but didn't get the chance. A light sound, magnified by the acoustics of the hall and most likely some kind of sound amplifying spell, sounded throughout the room. Everyone turned to Professor Dumbledore, who was tapping his spoon on a goblet.

Professor Dumbledore stood up and smiled at the crowd of curious students that were obviously wondering why he was here, and why he had just interrupted breakfast.

"Good morning to you all. I hope you have been enjoying your time here at Hogwarts. I do not normally do this, but as the situation has just come up last night, I have an important announcement to make, one that I think many of you will be elated to hear."

There was a twinkle of amusement in Dumbledore's eyes as he spoke.

"Before we begin, I would like to thank Mister Potter for his efforts on this. Without him, none of what I have to say would have been possible."

Harry blinked as all eyes turned towards him, his friends included. He wasn't aware of having done anything that would warrant such a commendation, unless...

Harry's eyes widened in realization just as Dumbledore continued,

"thanks to his efforts Nimbus Racing Broom company has decided to donate twenty-eight brand new Nimbus 2000's to our school for our four Quidditch teams to use."

There was a moment of shocked silence. All eyes had gone wide as they stared at the raven haired boy. Harry shifted a bit under the stares, wondering if perhaps he had gone too far this time. Maybe he should have done something a bit more discreet.

Then the applause began. It started with Dumbledore clapping most enthusiastically, a large smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes. Harry wondered if the old man knew what he was trying to do and helped him along by making the announcement himself. Soon, more and more people began to clap. Students started standing up, cheering loudly. Even the older Slytherin students were cheering. Harry saw and heard the Weasley twins whistling over at the Gryffindor table. Tracey Davis was looking at him with a kind of worshipful glance that honestly had him disturbed.

There were a few people here and there who were not cheering for him. He could see looks of jealousy from a few people at various tables. Draco and his ilk, the pug faced Pansy and other Death Eater children were giving him hateful glances, and Daphne Greengrass was frowning at him.

A small amount of tension in his shoulders faded as he realized his gamble had paid off. He now had a broom to use, and no one could say anything about him getting preferential treatment because everyone else had the same broom he did. The plan had actually gone off even better than expected thanks to Dumbledore.

He frowned again. How had Dumbledore known about this when he had not received a reply from Andromeda? That was something he wanted to know.

Perhaps Andromeda had wanted to surprise him? He knew the woman had a bit of a mischievous streak that did not show very often hidden behind that professional demeanor. It did sound like something she would do, though it wasn't quite the kind of subtle act he would have expected from her. And she did know of his plan. Maybe she had contacted

Dumbledore so he could make the announcement? He decided to ask Andromeda when he went home for Christmas. For now he would simply be thankful everything had turned out for the best.

"I'VE FINALLY FIGURED IT OUT!"

Silence descended upon the hall almost as quickly as it came. Everyone stared at Hermione Granger, who had suddenly jumped to her feet, a look of triumph on her face. The girl flushed as she realized she had just shouted out loud and, after quickly mumbling out an embarrassed apology, sat back down and almost shrunk into her robes like some kind of turtle.

Hannah, Lisa, Neville, Susan, and Terry all looked at each other, confused.

"Figured... what out?" Hannah asked cautiously, looking at the bushy haired girl like she had gone insane. Hermione just blushed some more and tried to hide further in her robes.

As the others looked at the girl in confusion, Harry hid his laughter by snorting into his goblet.

XoX

"I can't believe you actually managed to buy everyone Nimbus 2000's," Angelina shook her head as she and the rest of the Gryffindor team sat in the locker rooms getting ready for their first game against Slytherin. Sitting by her side was Alicia on her left, and a grinning Katie on her right. The latter had the broom in her lap, the former was actually stroking the broom like it was some kind of cat. Harry found the sight disturbing, but at least it was better than seeing how Ms. Figg treated all of her cats.

"Oh, you'd better believe it," George said with a grin, tossing an arm over Harry's shoulder.

"Harry Potter does not do things halfway," added Fred, repeating the gesture on Harry's left.

"Yes indeed. It's all or nothing with this lad."

"In his mind, there is no such thing as overboard."

"Yes, even overkill is a word that has no meaning in his vocabulary."

"I am surprised," Harry interrupted in a dry voice, "that you even know what the word vocabulary means."

Alicia, Angelina and Katie snickered, while Fred and George gave him mock offended looks.

"Oi! I will have you know that Gred and I are the very definition of sophistication and snobbery."

"Indeed, Forge and myself are so sophistimacated that our vocabulary supersedes that of everyone else's."

"Too right. We're blokes of higher edumication."

"And you can't tell us otherwise," they finished together, much to the amusement of those in the room. Well, those whose name wasn't Oliver Wood, who did not look very happy.

"What I want to know," the surly captain began with a brooding glare, "is why you decided to buy all of the other teams Nimbus 2000's as well."

"First of all, I didn't buy the brooms," Harry gave Oliver a blank stare until the older boy became uncomfortable, "In fact, I didn't pay a single knut for these brooms. I merely... convinced Nimbus Broom Racing Company that it would be in their best interest to donate the brooms to the school in order to promote their products."

"How did you do that?" Katie asked curiously.

Harry tilted his head.

"I'm not exactly sure I understand the question. Could you clarify?"

"I mean, how did you convince the Nimbus Broom Company to give twenty-eight Nimbus 2000's away for free."

A mysterious smile graced Harry's lips.

"Ah, but I never did say they were free, did I? I just said that I didn't have to pay for them." Katie frowned. "As to the how, let's just say there are many more ways to get what you want than simply tossing a bucket full of galleons around and leave it at that."

Not wanting to go into details about how he, or more specifically Andromeda, had managed to convince Nimbus Broom Racing Company to donate twenty-eight brooms on his behalf, Harry turned back to Oliver.

"As to your second question, I believe that answer should be obvious. It was to level the playing field. When we win, I don't want people to say it was because we had better brooms than everyone else, I want them to know that we won because we are more skilled, more talented, and just plain better than they are."

Harry had always possessed a strong sense of fair play when it came to sports. To him, it should be the skill of the players that won the day, not the superior equipment they possessed. One of the things that had always disgusted him about professional sports in the muggle world was how many athletes took steroids and other enhancement drugs to improve their performance. That same situation applied here, albeit, in a different manner. Instead of drugs people had superior brooms.

It was also a matter of pride for him. Harry liked to be the best. He enjoyed proving to himself that he was the best. In his mind, he couldn't be the best if his side had an unfair advantage. By leveling the playing field, he was ensuring that no side was disadvantaged in any way. Victory would be determined by the skills of the players, not their brooms.

"Well," Oliver still looked a bit surely, but seemed somewhat mollified, "I suppose that makes sense."

"You know, you're awfully noble for a first-year," Katie said with a smile.

Harry tilted his head to side in an endearing gesture of idle curiosity.

"You think so?"

"I know so," Katie nodded, "I don't think anyone else has ever thought about how unfair it is that some people have better brooms than others."

"I guess." Harry shrugged. He didn't think he was particularly noble. Harry was doing this for his own selfish reasons. It just so happened that those reasons benefited everyone else as a side effect and not just him.

"Alright, enough of this," Oliver said, fed up with all this talk that had nothing to do with the coming game. "This is the first game of the season and we're up against Slytherin. We need to win, we're *going* to win," he gave them all a stern glare, as if doing so would motivate them to do their best, "This is the best team we've had in years. I know we can win this."

"Don't you worry, Ollie," Fred said cheerfully.

"Yeah, we've got this in the bag," George added.

"How could we possibly lose. We've got new brooms."

"We've got a new kick arse Seeker."

"Our victory is at hand!"

Oliver stared at them, the maniacal gleam in his eyes shining like a beacon. It was almost terrifying.

"Right. Good luck everyone."

They all stood up and made their way onto the pitch. Harry walked behind Fred as the slightly cramped locker opened up into the wide Quidditch Pitch. The stadium was abuzz with noise, the stands packed with students sitting in them, squashed together like a can of sardines. It looked like the entirety of Hogwarts had come to see this game.

Harry's eyes zoomed in on one spot in particular. There, fluttering in the breeze was a large banner that said 'Potter for the Win!' and would flash colors, changing from red and gold to silver and blue to black and yellow then green and silver, every five seconds. Harry smiled when he realized his friends must have charmed that for him. It felt nice to know people were supporting him.

In the middle of the pitch was Madam Hooch wearing the black and white robes of a referee. The Slytherin team was already on the pitch, carrying their brand new Nimbus 2000s. Harry almost laughed when he saw several eyes travel to him, confusion warring on their faces. It was amusing to see their reactions, though he hoped it would further help breach the gap that divided Gryffindor and Slytherin.

Standing right next to Madam Hooch was the Slytherin Captain, an ugly looking sixth year by the name Marcus Flint. He was big and gangly and his body looked disproportion to his head. His facial features were distorted, with his mouth being bigger than everything else and his teeth being exceptionally large. The boy looked like someone had tried to crossbreed a human with a troll.

Harry and the rest of the Gryffindor team made their way to the center of the field. With everyone now around her, Madam Hooch gave a nod.

"Now I want a nice, clean game, all of you," Madam Hooch looked at them all with a stern expression, made all the sharper by her Hawk-like eyes. Harry noticed that her gaze lingered on Flint's longer than anyone else. It merely served to confirm what everyone said about the Slytherin team cheating. "Now, mount your brooms."

Harry mounted his broom, smiling as he felt the familiar thrill of adrenaline that came whenever he was in competition.

Madam Hooch brought the whistle to her mouth and gave it a hard blow, the small silver device emitting a fierce noise that belied it's tiny size.

Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor—what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too—"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

Harry had to withhold a smile at Lee Jordan's commentary, as well as Professor McGonagall's outburst. If this was how he was for all of the

games, these matches would prove to be very interesting.

Everyone had quickly gone to their positions. Adrian Pucey had the Quaffle and was being guarded on either side by Marcus Flint and Graham Montague. The three Chasers from his team, Alicia, Angelina, and Katie were all trying to find break through their play to get the Quaffle. Several meters away Fred and George were smacking the Bludgers toward the trio of Slytherin Chasers, but their efforts were stymied by Slytherin's own Beaters. High above them all, Terrence Higgs, Slytherin's Seeker, searched for the Snitch.

Harry ignored Terrence and drove towards Adrian, pushing to his top speed within a few seconds.

For a moment, Harry reveled in the feeling of being in the air, the wind as it whipped about his face, the way the broom seemed to respond to his slightest touch, as if it knew exactly what he wanted it to do before he did it. This feeling, it was unlike anything he had ever felt before. The joy he felt flying on those school brooms paled comparison to what he felt now.

Then the moment was over. Adrian threw the Quaffle towards Marcus, and Harry twitched his broom in this new direction.

Before Flint even had a clue on what was happening, Harry was there, diving right by him. With a sharp twist, the broom under his legs flipped end over end. His left leg extended outwards as his body and broom corkscrewed through the air. A grin crossed his face as his foot connected with the Quaffle, not only launching it out of Marcus' path, but into Katie's.

"UNBELIEVABLE!" Came the shout from Lee Jordan. "Harry Potter pulls off a miraculous stunt worthy of the professional leagues and breaks up the Slytherin's play! It looks like Wood made a great move when he placed Potter on the team!"

Flint glared at Harry with a look of absolute loathing. He tried to knock the boy off his broom, but by that time Harry was already moving away.

"Katie has the Quaffle. Passes it to Angelina who passes it to Alicia. Marcus is closing in, boy does he look mad. And once again he's blocked

by Potter! Alicia's going in for the shot—no! She passes it back to Katie who tosses it in and scores! A fabulous play by Potter and the Flying Foxes!"

"Flying Foxes?" Professor McGonagall's dry voice comes out sounding confused.

"Of course, foxes because of how damn foxy they are, and how lovely their backsides look on a broom."

"Enough of this, Jordan! Either you cease this irresponsible commentary or so help me I will see you out of this box this instant!"

"... Sorry Professor."

Harry's eyes constantly scanned the pitch, even as he gestured to Fred and George. The Slytherin's were making another play. It looked like Higgs was even trying to get in on it in order to help, but was rebuffed by Flint.

As the angry Terrence Higgs flew up high again, the three Slytherin Chasers tried to maneuver themselves around each other to present a difficult target. The Beaters were on either side, prepared to defend the trio, while Gryffindor's own trio split up to wait for a moment of opportunity.

That moment came when Harry dove at the nearest Slytherin Beater. Fred followed behind him, prepping for a shot while George harrassed Higgs to keep him occupied. The Slytherin boy's eyes widened as Harry played a game of chicken. At the last second Harry pulled up while the Slytherin Beater pulled down, not only allowing Harry to pass but also running face first into a Bludger that came from Fred. The Beater almost fell off his broom and was forced to hold his stomach tightly from the pain. The youngest of the Gryffindor team sped straight through the center of the Slytherin formation.

"And it looks like another brilliant interference from Potter! These Slytherin's really need to step up their game if they want to get anywhere! Montague drops the Quaffle, which is picked up by Alicia. She's driving towards the goal posts. Angelina and Potter are playing interference.

Alicia passes to Katie who fakes and—score another point for Gryffindor! It's twenty Gryffindor! Zilch Slytherin! That's showing those dirty snakes whose boss!"

"LEE JORDAN!"

The game continued to progress. Harry would help the Chasers while keeping his eyes open for the Snitch. He would occasionally team up with Fred and George, either to harass Higgs or the Slytherin Chasers. Play after play was made with the Gryffindor team slowly rapidly gaining points. They made sure to keep the Slytherin team off guard as much as possible, leaving them no time to react.

Unfortunately, they couldn't keep ahead of the game forever. Eventually the other team began to wise up.

Harry moved in, once more flying interference so Katie or Angelina could get the ball. He closed in on the Slytherin Chasers, who flew in a tight arrow formation. Before he could properly interrupt the play, his instincts screamed at him to move. Not one to ignore such a blatant warning, he did, and just narrowly dodged the Bludger that came close to colliding with his back.

For a moment, he thought that was the last of the problems, but then another Bludger came screaming at him from the front, and Harry was forced to corkscrew out of the way.

He yanked on his broom, hurtling himself above the Bludgers as Fred and George moved in to intercept. With his ability to interfere with the play broken, the Slytherin Chasers, led by Marcus Flint made it to the goal posts guarded by Oliver Wood.

"Flint passes to Pucey, who passes to Montague and back to Flint. The shots lined up and—blocked! Oliver Wood has blocked the shot! Alicia has the Quaffle. She passes to Angelina. Angelina fakes a pass back to Alicia, then passes to Katie. Katie's moving in towards the goal and—what kind of foul move is that! Marcis Flint rams into Katie Bell and almost knocks her off her broom! What the hell are you think you foul, loathsome Snake!"

"JORDAN!"

"I'm not sorry Professor! He deserves to be called worse!"

Things continued to even out. With the Slytherin team resorting to cheating to keep up with the Gryffindor team. Marcus Flint got a blatching foul called on him when he tried to knock Angelina off her broom. Adrian Pucey was called on account of flacking, the Beaters each got a call on cobbing, Graham Montague got three fouls for blurting, and Slytherin's keeper got seven fouls for flacking. The Gryffindor team got many penalty shots due to the other teams excessive cheating, and made sure each one counted.

Despite the use of fouling to get even, the Slytherin team continued to have a tough time of actually scoring. Harry, Fred and George, when not keeping Terrence Higgs busy, did their best to team up with the Chasers and keep the Slytherins from scoring. When Flint and the others did make it past the group, they had to contend with Oliver, who took each shot fired at him as a personal insult and did his best to keep the Quaffle out of his goals. Very few shots ever made it through his guard.

By this point Harry felt pretty good about their chances to win. They were ahead by 100 points, and despite Slytherin scoring a few goals, Gryffindor climbed steadily ahead. If the opposition wanted to have any hope of winning, they would need to find the Snitch quickly.

Which was why Harry decided it was time to end the game on his terms.

He flew high into the air to scan the surrounding pitch. The Snitch had chosen a great place to hide as he had not seen it appear at all since the game started. Higgs hadn't had much luck either, though that may have had something to do with how the Weasley twins kept him occupied when not helping Harry.

A quick glance around the pitch showed him that the Snitch still had yet to show up. He wondered where it could have hidden itself. There weren't a lot of places. The goal posts, behind the stands, and possibly inside of the stands. Perhaps that's where it was. Harry pondered whether he should check the stands out or wait for the Snitch to appear.

And that's when it happened. His broom gave a violent lurch, forcing Harry to keep a firm grip with both hands. It shuddered, then stopped.

Harry frowned. What was that? He had never heard of a broom doing that before. Even the school brooms hadn't done anything like this. And this was not just any broom, but a brand new Nimbus 2000. There was simply no way it could be any kind of malfunction. Perhaps a small mistake in the manufacturing process then?

The broom jerked to the left and all thoughts left Harry's mind as he quickly locked his arms in place. His Nimbus jerked to the right, then up, then down. Back and forth, left and right, up and down, the broom began to buck and shudder and kick like a bull at a rodeo, and all Harry could do was hang on for dear life.

"I say! What the blood hell is wrong with Harry's broom?!"

"LEE JOR—oh my!"

XoX

"What's going on with Harry's broom!?"

Tracey Davis was scared sick. And to think, the day had been going so well, too. It was the first match of the season. All of the teams had new brooms, and her newest and, quite possibly, coolest friend, Harry Potter, was making his debut entrance as Gryffindors star Seeker. Better still, she had managed to finally drag her friend Daphne with her to sit with the others. The blond had not been pleased, but considering it was either sit alone in the common room or sit with Malfoy and his ilk, she had not had much of a choice in the matter.

One might wonder why Tracey was not supporting her House when they were faced off against their most bitter rivals. The reasons were quite simple. Tracey hated her Quidditch team, bunch of sexist jerks that they were, and liked Harry Potter, who had not only befriended her despite their houses being bitter rivals, but supported her. It was only right she support him.

The game had been going so well in her mind. Harry had proven himself

to be an incredible Seeker, not just trying to find the Snitch, but actually helping break up plays and work with the Chasers and Beaters so well that the Slytherin team had been caught completely off guard. Even with them resorting to dirty cheating the Gryffindor team remained strong and ahead of the game.

Now it looked like all that was about to fall apart as Harry Potter was forced to hang on his broom for dear life as it did its utmost to toss him off.

All around her everyone else was pointing and whispering at Harry as he clung to the broom like a leech, his teeth grit. Gasps were heard as each jerk threatened to unseat the boy.

Sitting on all sides of her, Harry's other friends were anxious with worry. Susan and Lisa covered their mouths with their hands, eyes wide. Hannah looked pale and frightened. She was actually beginning to shake. Both Neville and Hermione almost looked sick with worry, with the bushy haired witch gnawing at her thumb like she was trying to chew it off. Tracey could see Terry narrowing his eyes and furrowing his brow. She wondered what he was thinking. And even Blaise seemed to be worried, though the only way she could tell was because his left foot had begun incessantly tapping the floorboard beneath them like a hummingbird's wings.

"His broom is cursed."

Eight sets of eyes turned to look at Daphne. The golden-haired blond worried her lower lip. Tracey didn't know if the girl was worried or simply thinking. Even she, Daphne's best friend since childhood, sometimes had a hard time reading the pureblood.

"What do you mean his broom is cursed!?" asked Hermione, almost shrieking with worry. Tracey winced. She didn't dislike the girl, but sometimes that voice of hers was just too much.

"It means exactly what I said," Daphne rolled her eyes, "someone is cursing his broom."

"But who would do such a thing?" asked Susan, her eyes impossibly

wide and scared. Tracey wondered the same thing. Harry was a pretty likable bloke. Why would anyone want to curse his broom? Unless they were jealous, which was a distinct possibility. But then, the only person who would have had the gall to do something so stupid was that git, Draco Malfoy, and he simply wasn't smart enough to curse a broom.

"I don't know!" Daphne snapped. "In order to curse a broom, not only do you have to be incredibly skilled at dark magic, you also have to maintain eye contact for the spell to work. No one here should be capable of such a feat except for a... a..."

Tracey became worried as her friend trailed off and the blond's eyes widened slightly. It was almost imperceptible, but she had known Daphne for a long time, and could pick up some of the more obvious nuances in the girl. She was surprised. That scared Tracey more than she cared to admit.

"Daphne?"

"A teacher," her friend murmured, her eyes going up to the teacher's viewing booth.

Tracey's eyes widened. Daphne couldn't be serious? A teacher cursing a student's broom? A teacher cursing Harry frickin' Potter's broom? The very thought was absurd. No teacher would be stupid enough to commit political suicide like that. Would they?

"How could you possibly think that?" asked Hermione, appalled, like the very thought that a teacher would willingly try to harm or kill a student was an impossibility. "There is no way a teacher would possibly curse a student's broom, it's, it's against the rules!"

Again, Daphne rolled her eyes.

"Think whatever you want, Granger. I'm simply going to inform you that you're wrong."

Hermione huffed, arms crossing over her chest. She looked like she was about to retort.

"It's Snape!"

The gasp came from Hannah. Tracey turned to look at twin-tailed girl with a frown on her pretty face.

"Now look," she started, a bit peeved that this girl was accusing her head of house, "Just because Professor Snape was a bit of a jerk to Harry during our first class, doesn't mean he's responsible for trying to kill him."

"No," Blaise swallowed, eyes pointed the same place Hannah's had been, "he is responsible."

"What?"

Tracey whipped her head around to look at Blaise. Both he and Daphne were staring at the Teacher's viewing booth. Her head snapped towards the booth so quickly she was surprised she didn't hear a snap. There, her eyes scanned the booth and found Professor Snape. A Professor Snape maintaining complete eye contact with Harry Potter's broom. A Professor Snape who was muttering what looked like some kind of incantation under his breath. Tracey paled.

"Crap, it is Professor Snape doing this." She looked at the rest of her friends. Most of them were pale, except Susan who was red-faced and glaring in Professor Snape's direction. Tracey was not only shocked to see the sweet girl actually glaring at anything. The brunette honestly believed she didn't have it in her. "What do we do?"

"We need to get Professor Snape to break eye contact." Hermione stood up. Were the situation not so grave, Tracey would have laughed at how the girl was still calling Snape professor when he was trying to kill her friend. "I can do that, but I'll need someone to come with me just in case."

"I'll go," Blaise said, also standing up. Hermione gave him a nod and the two quickly set off.

Tracey found herself sitting in between Daphne and Susan, the redhead gripping her and she gripping Daphne's as the two snuck off. She craned her neck to look back up at Harry's, whose broom was still trying to throw him off.

She really, *really*, hoped that Hermione and Blaise broke Snape's spell soon or there might not be any Harry left to save.

XoX

This, Harry decided, was not a good situation. His broom was cursed to try and kill him, and he was currently being forced to hold on for dear life as it bucked and jerked and spasmed all over the air. Below him, Fred and George Weasley had actually stopped taunting the Slytherin's in order to hang under him in case he should fall. A few times one of them would try to get to him so he could jump on their broom, but then his broomstick would just take him out of their reach, or begin bucking more wildly.

Surprisingly, a few of on the Slytherin team actually looked worried as they gazed at him. At least he could not be sure that they were not involved, *and* that they were beginning to like him. Well, except for Flint, who hated him simply because he was better. But, eh, you can't win them all.

Harry growled in frustration as he channeled magic through his hands, forcing them to stick to the brooms handle. He could feel the foreign magic invading his broom. Magic that did not belong to him or the broom. What made it that much worse was that there was nothing he could do to stop whoever was cursing his broom. Unfortunately, he did not have any knowledge of counter-curses.

Once again, Harry had to curse himself for his shortsightedness. When he began looking up offensive magic, all he had focused on were the offensive spells. Now he was suffering for his lack of forethought.

Another wild jerk had him unseated from his broom. Loud screams came from the crowd of onlookers as Harry found himself hanging off his Nimbus' handle by his hands. His lips peeled back in a snarl. He hoped whoever was trying to kill him had health insurance, because they were going to suffer when he got through with them.

The broom stopped bucking. The act was so sudden that Harry had to blink in confusion. Out of the corner of his eyes he caught fire in the teacher's booth. Snape's robes were on fire to be exact. He blinked

again, then saw Hermione and Blaise crawling back down to the stands from in between the small gaps in the viewing booth. He smiled. It was good to have friends willing to look out for him.

Hands firmly on his broom, Harry used the impressive strength in his arms to twist himself up in a spin worthy of an Olympic athlete using the horizontal bar. He twisted his body ninety degrees, and landed firmly back on the cushioning charms of his broom. Then he was off.

"It looks like Potter's back on his broom. What the bloody hell happened to it, I wonder?"

Looks like Professor McGonagall was too shocked to comment on Lee's commentary, Harry mused.

He drove towards the ground, where he could see a small glint of gold hovering in the air. Terrence had seen it to, for he was dive bombing towards it as quickly as he could. Harry urged his broom faster, coaxing every bit of speed he could from the newest and fastest broom on the market. He and Higgs were on opposite sides, each closing the distance fast.

The Snitch must have realized it was being chased, for it quickly darted away. Harry nudged the broom towards it, and he and Higgs from themselves side by side.

The much larger boy tried to ram Harry out of the way, using his body weight to knock the raven haired boy off course. It would have worked, had he actually hit Harry. The youngest of the Quidditch players twisted his broom up, barreled rolled over the boy's head, and landed on Higgs' left. They were still neck and neck, but the small stunt had cost Higgs some speed while Harry had lost none. And that was all the lead Harry needed to win.

He shot forward, his hand flashing out with enough speed that his hand almost blurred. His fingers curled around the snitch as he made a fist. With a grin, he brought his hand up above his head and showed his catch to the crowd.

"Harry Potter's got the Snitch! Gryffindor wins two hundred and fifty to

eighty! That's the way it should be! Show those slimey, ill begotten, filthy, loathsome –"

"LEE JORDAN!"

"... Sorry Professor."

XoX

After winning the first game of the season, Harry had set down and found himself engulfed by his team. Angelina and Alicia gave him a kiss on the cheek, Katie had hugged him tightly and told him he was the most amazing flier she had ever seen, Fred and George had laughed and joked and congratulated him on 'kicking arse and taking names' as the muggle saying went, and Oliver had cried. *Cried* tears of manly pride at their victory.

That had been all kinds of disturbing.

Then the crowd had come. Not just students from his House, but from a number of Houses. They had surged forward and Harry had found himself being hoisted into the air as people laughed and cheered in congratulations. The jubilation had lasted until the Gryffindor team managed to escape the crowd and get into the locker rooms where they could take a shower and put on some clean clothes before heading back to the Gryffindor Common Room.

By the time they had actually arrived at the tower, the party had been in full swing. It looked like the rest of the House had been waiting for them. The seven players had entered the common room to once more be overcome by raucous applause. A few of the students who knew where the kitchens were had managed to procure food, and Lee Jordan had even managed to get some butterbeer, though how he had done so when there was no butterbeer at Hogwarts, Harry didn't know.

He suspected it had something to do with the Weasley twins when he saw them passing Lee some money.

Out of the seven players, Harry had gotten the most attention. This he had expected. It was partly to do with being the Boy-Who-Lived, but

mostly because he was not only the Seeker, often times considered the most prestigious position on the Quidditch team, but also the youngest one in the century and had just won them the first game of the year. That it was against Slytherin, who despite his best efforts was still considered their most bitter rival, was only the icing on the cake.

He took their congratulations with a smile and humility that he had most decidedly not shown during the actual game itself. He spoke with Seamus and Dean, both of whom had been psyched that they had won their first game and even more that it was because of him. Then Dean had made a comment about football and the two got into an argument about whether or not Quidditch was better. Harry had let them argue and moved around to mingle with the rest of the students. He had spoken with Fay Dunbar a bit, who had just blushed bright red when he talked to her. Then moved on to Parvati and Lavender. They had just giggled at him so he moved on quickly.

He and Hermione had spoken some, but the girl seemed preoccupied while they spoke, as if she were struggling with something. Harry was tempted to ask her what was wrong, and if it had anything to do with her setting Snape's robes on fire, but decided now was not the time. She had congratulated him and then moved off to sit on the crouch, where she would remain until bed.

Harry mostly spoke with Neville and his team, joking, laughing, and sharing tales of their exploits to a crowd even though everyone already knew what had happened during the game. The round-faced boy had been incredibly excited that they had won. While Neville was no Quidditch fanatic like Tracey, that did not mean he didn't enjoy the sport. It was even better when they won because of his friend.

The party had gone perfectly. Well, almost perfectly. If he could just get the older girls to stop pinching his cheeks it would be perfect.

Of course, if something is perfect, or as close to perfect as something could get, it was almost a sure thing that someone would come along the ruin it.

That someone, in this instance, just so happened to be none other than

Cormac McGlaggen. The burly second year had not been partying with everyone else, and instead he chosen to sit on one of the plush chairs and glare at Harry from his spot. Most everyone had ignored him for the most part, Harry included, but it seemed the boy had finally had enough after Harry received a kiss on the cheek from a madly blushing Katie Bell. With a scowl, the second year student stood up and stomped his way over to Harry.

"I bet you think you're so great, don't you Potter," McGlaggen gave an almost Snape worthy sneer that, unfortunately for him, did not work on his face because he was still a child, and instead of being frightening or the like, merely looked comical. The common room had grown silent as he glared at Harry, who merely raised an eyebrow. "I bet you think you're so clever, buying your way on the team with those new brooms."

Harry tilted his head to the side, then closed his eyes.

"What are you on about now, McGlaggen," he opened his killing curse green eyes and stared at McGlaggen with a blank look that had the boy shifting uncomfortably. Surprisingly, the second year did not back down. "You know as well as I that I made the team after I beat you at try-outs. The brooms came in long after I made Seeker."

"I bet that's just what you want us to think," McGlaggen's sneer was back in place, "I bet you made a secret deal with Wood before try-outs to buy your way onto the team. You may have everyone else fooled, but not me. I know the truth."

"The truth," Harry murmured thoughtfully, "You, Cormac McGlaggen, are an idiot."

McGlaggen's eyes widened as several gasps came from those watching. Off to the side, Harry could see the Gryffindor team glaring almost hatefully at Cormac. Neville was looking a bit worried and Hermione was biting her lip. Oliver was glaring at McGlaggen with a particularly scornful look.

"What?" asked McGlaggen, as if he had not heard what Harry said.

"Do you need me to repeat myself for you?" Harry gave the boy a

mocking smile, "very well, McGlaggen, you are very stupid."

McGlaggen's gaping turned into an ineffective glare.

"How dare you!"

"If you had any brains in that empty head of yours, you would have realized that I could not have possibly bought my way onto the team. Oliver would have never agreed to let me get brooms for all four Hogwarts House teams." Harry shook his head. "You really should learn to face the facts, *Cormac*, I am simply more skilled on a broom than you are."

It wasn't his most intelligent move ever. Mocking someone. Normally, he would have never done such a thing as it would most definitely alienate whoever he was taunting and ensured that he could never gain them as an ally. He didn't particular care about that right now. Cormac McGlaggen was a bully and a braggart, someone who was more than willing to put down others if it made him feel better. And if there was one thing on this good green earth that he hated more than anything else, it was bullies.

Cormac's face twisted into a truly hideous expression of rage. The boy's face was redder than a boiled over lobster, and his scowling, hateful expression made him look like an angry troll.

"Why you!"

He surged forward, hands in front of him, as if to shove or strangle Harry. It was hard to tell. Not that it mattered in any case. Harry had no intention of letting the older boy actually do anything.

Gasps and screams were heard as their peers watched what was happening. Oliver made to move forward, intent on stopping any harm from coming to his new Seeker. There was no need.

As McGlaggen came forward with the intent to hurt, Harry moved. A single step forward, followed by bringing his hands up and in between McGlaggen's. He spread his arms apart, forcing the second year boy's hands to move wide. It left his guard open. Wide open.

Harry darted in quickly, moving past McGlaggen's guard like greased lightning. A speedy jab to the solar plexus was followed by an elbow under the jaw, then a knuckle punch to the throat. Cormac nearly doubled over when the first punch hit as all the air came out of his lungs in a loud '*woosh!*' His head snapped up and his back arched most painfully as the elbow found its place under his jaw, smacking so hard his teeth chattered together loudly. He grasped at his throat, gagging and choking as the knuckle from Harry's index and middle finger found purchase on his throat. All of this was followed up by Harry grabbing a fistful of McGlaggen's hair on the back of his head, and bringing the boy's nose onto his knee.

In the already deafening silence, the loud '*crunch!*' of McGlaggen's nose breaking was almost overpowering. Cormac McGlaggen's head was snapped back up from the force of Harry's brutal attack. Blood poured out of his now broken nose. His eyes were dulling, losing their focus. He blinked several times. Then he fell backwards, toppling over like a house of cards that had been knocked down as he lost his grip on consciousness.

Harry sighed as he turned his eyes to the many wide eyed stares he was receiving. The members of his Quidditch team were looking at him in shock. They also seemed amused, but that was mostly the grinning twins. Oliver did a look rather proud too. Neville was gaping at him, Hermione was too, but her wide eyed, jaw dropping look was much more comical. Most facial expressions seemed to be somewhere in between Hermione's and Neville's.

Maybe he had gone a bit overboard. He didn't regret his actions, that is, he didn't regret putting McGlaggen in his place because, really, the boy was a jerk and an idiot and someone needed to knock him from his self placed pedestal. But perhaps he shouldn't have been so violent.

"Well," Harry started slowly, "I hope this didn't ruin the party."

There was silence for only a few seconds, then a shout of, "that was AWESOME!" came from the twins and the rest of the Gryffindors began to cheer. Harry found himself surrounded by boys asking him how he managed to take out McGlaggen, and girls telling him how cool what he

had done was while they giggled. Everyone ignored McGlaggen where he was laid out on the floor. They should probably have someone take him to the hospital wing. Eventually.

Harry smiled. He didn't know what he had been worried about.

I would like to thank everyone who reviewed my last chapter, and I hope you enjoyed this one. If you have any questions, comments, concerns, critiques, or if you just want to tell me I'm awesome (always a nice thing to hear), please leave a review.

Thank you and have a very happy New Year.

Help

Help

I woke up feeling unusually comfortable, which was odd because judging by the feel underneath my back, I was clearly lying on a couch.

I opened my eyes to gaze upon a ceiling, white and bumpy. It possessed a number of familiar patterns that I recognized. This was the ceiling to Lisa's living room.

Last night I had spent the night at Lisa's house. I actually meant to head home but became so caught up watching movies with Lisa that I must have fallen asleep. Ah well, it's no skin off my bones. A night at the Crawfts sounded infinitely more pleasant than a night with my relatives.

Something shifted against my chest, and I suddenly became aware of the weight on top of me. I looked down and blinked several times upon being met with a mass of brown hair. Lisa was lying on top of me, holding me close like a life-sized plush toy. She was also drooling all over my shirt.

I twitched.

The flash of a camera went off, spots appearing before my vision. I blinked several times to rid myself of the white flares behind my eyes. I then focused on where the flash came from.

"Good morning, Harry," a smiling Mrs. Crawft greeted me. "I hope you slept well."

I blinked some more, thinking about her question. "You know, surprisingly, I did actually sleep pretty well."

"Oh my," Mrs. Crawft said, putting her hands to her cheeks, "really?"

She had an odd smile that I didn't like, but ignored as best I could.

"Um." I nodded. "Really, though I don't really know why." I guessed it was

just because I wasn't sleeping at the Dursleys.

"Hmm."

Mrs. Crawft hummed. I got the feeling she had her own theories, but didn't want to know what they were. For some reason, I was afraid of learning them.

"That's just lovely," she said, before holding up her camera some more. "Now then, I think I'm going to take some more pictures of you two. Hope that's alright."

I shrugged, or tried to shrug. It was hard when someone had you in a grip of titan-level strength. "I don't really mind. Not sure why you want to take pictures, though."

Mrs. Crawft smiled as she held the camera to her face. "Don't worry, you will eventually."

It would be half an hour later that Lisa woke up. I would then learn exactly why Mrs. Crawft had been so keen on taking pictures when my only friend began chasing her mum around the house, screaming in outrage and embarrassment.

On a side note, Mr. Crawft would be very displeased when he woke up and learned his daughter and I fell asleep together on the couch. Go figure.

XoX

"Is he alright?"

That was the very first question Hannah asked as she and Susan sat down next to Harry, Hermione, Neville, Lisa and Terry at the Gryffindor table. She was, of course, referring to none other than Neville Longbottom, who looked like he'd been shoved through a metaphorical meat grinder. The boy's head had fallen onto the table, large bags hung under his slightly bloodshot eyes and low, piteous moans escaped his mouth every few seconds. If weren't for the fact that he was sitting and not standing, the term 'dead on his feet' would be a most apt description

of how terrible the boy appeared.

"He's fine." Harry smiled as he patted Neville on the back, earning a small whimper for the action. "He just got through his first day of my exercise routine."

"Exercise?" Lisa said, eying the Longbottom heir with a mixture of fascination, horror and pity. "And just what kind of... exercise makes someone look half-dead?"

"Ah, well," Harry started, "he's only like this because he's just not used to exercising. I'm sure that it will eventually become as easy as breathing for him."

Everyone looked from Harry to Neville, then back to Harry. As one they gulped.

"I don't think I even want to know what you consider exercise—" Terry gestured towards Neville, "—if this is the end result."

For a single second, Harry actually felt like pouting. Of course, he didn't, because that was something Lisa would have done, not him. Harry never pouted. But the urge was there. How strange.

Still, it was a bit depressing that none of them could see how this would benefit Neville in the long run. Granted, the boy really did look pretty horrible.

Maybe he should have gone easier on boy?

As breakfast continued, Neville eventually managed to drag himself into a half conscious state. At the very least he was conscious enough to sit up and begin eating his meal. He still looked like he might pass out at any second, though.

During this time many owls came swooping into the Great Hall. Several family owls came toward them. Lisa got a letter from her parents, Terry got the script for a new book that his dad had written and wanted his opinion about, Hannah got some sugar quills, and Susan got a letter as well as more ink and quills.

Over at the Slytherin table, Harry saw Draco's owl swoop down with more sweets for the spoiled boy. Draco hadn't looked too pleased when Harry walked in that morning, and it seemed as if not even getting to lord how rich his parents were over everyone else could bring his mood back. He was still glaring at Harry.

Not that Harry particularly cared. While the chance to gain an ally in what he had taken to calling the 'Death Eater Camp' could prove useful, it was not worth the trouble that would come with such an alliance. And while he would have liked to be able to use the old adage 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer' in this instance, felt that doing such would not benefit his situation right now.

Besides, he could just ask Blaise and Tracey to keep their ears to the ground for him when they were in the Slytherin common room.

Draco wasn't the only one who got something from parents at the Slytherin table. Harry saw that Blaise received a letter of some kind and Tracey managed to snatch one of the liquorice wands that had come with it. The dark-skinned boy sent her an exasperated look, but then offered one to Daphne, who absently poked at her eggs, barely paying any attention to what was going on around her.

A soft hoot alerted him to Hedwig landing directly in front of him. Her amber eyes burned into his as she showed him all of the mail attached to her leg. It was quite a bit. Not only had he received a number of letters, Hedwig was also carrying the Daily Prophet, which he now had a subscription for.

"Thanks, Hed," Harry said as he fed her some bacon and took the items from her. Hedwig gave a hoot as she gobbled up the bacon, and Harry began going over what she'd brought to him.

"What do you have there, Harry?" Lisa asked, curiosity dotting her fair features.

"A letter from Lisa, a bank statement with information about my investments, and the Daily Prophet Newspaper."

Harry tucked the letter from Lisa in his robe pocket as he spoke. He

would read that in the privacy of his room after classes ended so he could write a reply right away. After a moments thought, the bank statement went in with it, and Harry began looking through the newspaper to see what the latest news in the wizarding world was.

"It looks like Nimbus Racing Broom Company's decision to donate brooms to Hogwarts made headlines."

Susan, who was not only the closest to him but also not dead tired like Neville, leaned over his shoulder to see what the article said. There, in big bold, print was the title: *HARRY POTTER CONVINCES NIMBUS RACING BROOM COMPANY TO DONATE 28 BRAND NEW NIMBUS 2000s TO HOGWARTS!*

"It may have something to do with the fact that your name is also written in this," Susan said softly as she read article, which spoke about how Harry convinced the CEO of Nimbus Broom Racing Company to part with 28 brand new top of the line brooms. The article didn't say much, which was good because Harry had asked Andromeda to make sure the company remained quiet on what happened behind closed doors during their deal-making discussion. It pleased Harry to see that the man had been very tight lipped about what really went down, especially since they had not signed a magically binding contract. It said a lot about the CEO's integrity.

"That could have something to do with it, yes," Harry admitted with a mysterious smile, "I guess it can't be helped. This kind of publicity stunt is very big, especially in a community as small as magical Britain. And I don't doubt that many students wrote home about what happened as soon as breakfast was over. I wouldn't be surprised if the school's entire owlery had been emptied out that day."

"I wouldn't either," the redhead admitted, smiling.

Harry nodded, even as he continued looking through the paper. There wasn't much, just a few articles about what was happening in the wizarding world, which seemed to be very little. The most exciting thing to have happened in the magical community in a long time was the Gringotts break-in. Most of the stories now were simple affairs, new

policies on certain magical items, a few incidents where a muggle had their mind wiped because they accidentally discovered magic. The most interesting thing to have happened recently was how several magical items had found their way into a muggle novelty shop and ended up cursing a fair number of customers. Aurors had been called onto the scene and all the muggles had their minds obliterated.

A dull thud alerted everyone to the fact that Neville had fallen asleep. All of Harry's friends gave the boy whose face was now laying in his food sympathetic to pitying looks.

"Don't worry about him," Harry said, withholding a small chuckle. Ok, so he was definitely going to have to give the boy an easier exercise routine. It was still pretty funny to see someone like this, though. He hoped that didn't mean he was turning into a sadist. "I'll give him a pepper-up potion after breakfast. He'll be right as rain."

His friends took one look at his smiling face, then quickly went back to their food and conversation, only occasionally glancing at Neville as he snored away in his porridge.

XoX

"It was Professor Snape."

A small blink was the only sign of Harry's surprise. Neither he nor his friends had ever brought up what had happened during the Quidditch match with his broom being cursed. Hermione looked like she wanted to bring it up once or twice, but with all that was going on, and Harry not having much free time, she had kept her mouth shut. And none of the others looked like they wanted to speak of the incident at all. In fact, if one didn't know any better he would say they were all trying to forget the incident.

Harry was not sure what his friend's reasons for not talking were, but his were quite simple. He didn't want his friends to get involved. Whatever was going on, it was something serious. Something dangerous. He was sure that the person who had cursed his broom and the person who had released the troll in Hogwarts were one and the same. Anyone who could accomplish one of those tasks was dangerous; someone who could do

both was incredibly Dangerous. Capital on the D. And he didn't want his friends getting hurt, or worse, dead, because they tried to help him.

He had, of course, been looking into the incident on his own time, but so far it had led to nothing but dead ends. The problem was that Harry wasn't even sure how to go about getting the information he needed. He couldn't ask a teacher. They probably wouldn't answer him anyways. None of the other students knew anything either, not even the famed Hogwarts rumor mill knew about the person who tried to kill him. And so he was left trying to figure things out on his own.

Unfortunately, using common sense, logic and deduction only worked when you had clues to go off of, and he had none of those.

It was very frustrating situation, to say the least. Knowledge was power, and without a means of gaining that knowledge, Harry couldn't even begin looking into who had set the troll loose and cursed his broom, nor their reasons for doing so. He hated to admit it, but at this point he could do very little but keep his eyes open and his ears to the ground.

He looked at Tracey from where he was helping Hannah with her Transfiguration essay. The blond pig-tailed girl was good at Charms and Astronomy, but Transfiguration and Potions were difficult for her.

Tracey Davis bit her lower lip, an uncertain look in her eyes. Everyone else stared at her in surprise and a bit of resignation. It seemed they all had an unspoken agreement not to talk about what happened.

"Snape," Harry tasted the word with a frown, "You think it was Snape who cursed my broom?"

"Well, yeah." Tracey shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "I mean, he was the only one who could have done it. In order to Curse your broom, whoever did it would have to maintain eye contact and, well, I don't like admitting it, but my Head of House didn't look away from you since the start of your game, as far as I could see."

Harry frowned. He had not known that. It was one of the unfortunate side effects of eidetic memory. He could remember everything he laid eyes on, everything he ever smelled, every sight, sound, touch, or taste, yet if

his eyes didn't see something, if his ears didn't hear something, if he didn't feel something, then it wouldn't be there in his memory. Like a gap in his mind where his memories were stored, there was always something going on around him that his eyes didn't see because he wasn't looking at it at the time. It was hands down the most frustrating part of having eidetic memory.

During the Quidditch game Harry's eyes had not strayed towards the stands or teacher's viewing booth very often. He had only looked there on occasion when searching for the Snitch, and while Snape had indeed been staring at him every time he had looked over, that didn't give any conclusive evidence that Snape was the one who had cast the curse. After all, the ornery potions professor wasn't the only one that had been staring at him during the match.

"Is that why Hermione and Blaise set his robes on fire?" asked Harry.

Hermione blushed while Blaise settled for a nod. Tracey also nodded her head.

"Hannah was the one who first noticed him," Tracey said helpfully. Harry turned to Hannah, who blushed under his intense gaze. "We also saw him mumbling an incantation under his breath."

Harry leaned back in his chair, his face gaining a thoughtful look. His brows furrowed and his lips turned downwards in a frown. Everyone looked at him, worry etched on their faces, all except Blaise, who seemed more curious than perturbed.

"I do not believe that Snape is the one responsible for cursing my broom."

"What?" The word came from several people: Hannah, Hermione, Lisa and Tracey, while Susan's unmistakably soft voice exclaimed, "Why?"

Harry smiled at the redhead, who blushed something fierce, then looked at everyone else.

"The reason is quite simple," he began slowly, "he's too obvious a suspect."

It took several moments for anyone to respond, most simply seemed too shocked that Harry didn't think Snape had been the one to curse his broom. It would be Blaise who finally broke the silence.

"What do you mean he's too obvious a suspect?"

"How many of you know of Snape's history as a student here?" Harry asked. None of them knew anything of course, how could they? Snape never spoke of his past, and even if he were inclined to do so, Harry doubted he would tell a student. The question was purely rhetorical.

"Snape was a student in the same year as both my mother and father, and in fact, he was actually my mother's best friend before they first came to Hogwarts."

He smiled at the stunned faces all around him. Even Blaise was gaping at him.

"I know. Shocking. In any event, he and my mother were best friends. Then my father came along and, from the very first moment he laid eyes on mum, became smitten with her." Harry's eyes almost unconsciously softened as he recalled the words written in his mother's journal. "From my understanding, he tried to earn her affection ever since their first year at Hogwarts, but was rebuffed each and every time."

His eyes surveyed each of his friends. They were staring at him with a kind of hungry intensity that made him uncomfortable. He knew why, of course. Harry never spoke about anything related to his past or family. Granted, most people *knew* about the Potters, but few knew of the details like this. He wasn't even sure why he was telling them this, but that did not stop him.

"It's easy to see, then, why Snape and my father became rivals," he continued softly. "My father saw Snape as an obstacle on his path to gain Mum's affection. He and his friends began picking on Snape, playing pranks and making his life miserable. In return, Snape would retaliate. Their rivalry soon became one of the most bitter in the history of Gryffindor/Slytherin rivalries. They hated each other throughout school, and I imagine that, when mum chose my father over Snape, his hatred only grew."

"Is that why he was so... so horrible to you during our first potions class?" Tracey asked in a small voice, a rare event indeed, as her tone could usually be ascribed as rambunctious glee.

"Yes," said Harry, "I'm pretty sure that Snape's hatred of my father was so great that he took out his frustration on me, his rival's son."

"That's horrible," muttered Lisa, frowning. "Teacher's are supposed to be unbiased and helpful toward students. How could Professor Dumbledore allow someone like him to work here?"

"I'm sure the headmaster has his reasons," Harry said with a shrug. He just had no clue what those reasons were. Perhaps Dumbledore was keeping the man close to make sure he couldn't do anything harmful; keeping your enemies closer and all that. Though that did not explain why he allowed a man like Snape to teach children. Whatever the case, there wasn't much anyone could do about Snape right now. Not unless wanted to fight Dumbledore.

"But surely Professor Snape isn't that petty," Hermione argued, "I mean, it's been years, and he hasn't bothered you since our first class. And Professor Dumbledore wouldn't hire someone if they were willing to hurt the child of their school rival."

"No one's ever claimed Snape wasn't petty," Blaise retorted, "Even us in Slytherin know that Snape's petty and biased. We just don't say anything because often times he's the only person standing between us and persecution from the other three houses due to being in Slytherin."

Many of the others looked down at that. It was true. A lot of people in the other three houses distrusted people in Slytherin simply because they were in Slytherin. Those who were pureblood and half-blood had been told ever since they were old enough to comprehend complex issues on morality and propriety that people who went into Slytherin became evil, even if that wasn't actually true.

Once again, Harry found himself laying the blame for people's views about those sorted into Slytherin at Voldemort's feet. Thanks to him and his Death Eaters, the once noble house of Salazar had become tainted, slandered. It's very name had become synonymous with evil.

Thankfully, Harry was working to change that. Even if he was not in the House of Snakes, he would do what he could to bring it back to its former glory. That was part of the reason he had befriended Blaise and Tracey.

"Well, Snape's not the only one standing up for you now." Everyone looked over at Harry as he gave Tracey and Blaise a determined look. "You have us now, and while we may not be able to protect everyone in Slytherin at the moment, I can at least guarantee that no one will say anything bad about you two."

"Thank you," Tracey said softly, a grateful smile on her face. "You're not so bad," her face gained a sly expression, "for a Gryffindor."

Harry found himself giving Tracey a half grin.

"And you're not too bad yourself, for a Slytherin."

"I believe we are getting off topic," Blaise interrupted, though his voice contained a minor tremor of gratitude. "I believe you were about to tell us why you don't think Snape was the one who cursed your broom. So far, from what you've told us, it seems like he has every reason to do so."

"Which is exactly why it couldn't be him." Harry got back on track with their original topic. "Snape would be the number one suspect. While none of the students know of his rivalry with my father, all of the teachers who were old enough to teach here when they went to school, or the teachers who shared school with them, do. Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick, Professor Sprout, Madam Pomfrey, they all knew of the rivalry those two had. Snape isn't stupid. He may be arrogant and petty, but no one who goes into Slytherin lacks cunning..."

He trailed off, his head tilting to the side.

"Except for Malfoy, but he's an idiot."

There were several snickers all around. Harry was glad he'd had the forethought to set up a silencing charm around their table, otherwise Madam Pince would have kicked them out due to Tracey's loud fits of laughter. She really didn't like Malfoy.

"My point is, Snape wouldn't be stupid enough to put a curse on my broom when he would obviously be the first suspect."

"But maybe that's what he wants us to think," Hermione blurted out. "I mean, what if he knows that he's such an obvious suspect that he realized no one would suspect him because of how obvious he was."

"That is entirely possible, but not very probable," Harry informed her. "If that were the case, then he would have also realized that we would know it was him, or at least suspect it was him because he's so obvious a suspect that no one would suspect him."

"But if he knew that we would suspect him because he was such an obvious suspect that no one else would suspect him, then he probably knows that we can't do anything because even if we suspect him no one else does."

"That's true, but even if he did it because there was no way anyone would suspect him even if we told others we suspected he was behind it, it's still too obvious. Why go through all the trouble of doing something that puts you on someone's suspect list, especially when several of those people have parents with heavy political sway—or is a national wizarding celebrity. We may be kids, but we do have a good deal of power, by proxy if nothing else, and even an ant can topple a giant if enough ants are involved."

"Ugh..." Neville rubbed his forehead as he listened to the two go back and forth. "They're beginning to give me a headache with all this suspecting."

"You're not the only one," Tracey mumbled in complaint. Sitting in between Susan and Lisa, Hannah huffed and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I hope they don't keep going at this for too long. I need someone to help me with my homework."

"I could probably give you a hand," Terry offered, "granted, Transfiguration isn't my strong point, but I've already got my essay done."

Hannah looked over at Terry, then at Harry and Hermione, then back to Terry. She sighed.

"I think I'll take you up on that. Thanks."

"No problem."

XoX

November soon became December. Snow began to fall, and with it, a layer of white covered the Hogwarts' grounds outside of the castle. It was a very beautiful sight. The way the sun reflected against the soft, white pelt of snow in the morning light, causing the ground to shine and sparkle with a life of its own. The trees whose branches were covered in a layer of thick snow that occasionally blew down in a light sprinkling of snow flakes from a stiff breeze, creating a phantasmagorical shimmer in the air. Hogwarts castle appeared reminiscent of a winter wonderland, an effervescent fantasy that Harry had only read about in fiction novels.

There had only been one Quidditch game during that time: Hufflepuff vs. Ravenclaw. It was not as highly anticipated as Gryffindor vs Slytherin, nor was the game as intense. There had been no cheating, no spectacular plays, and the two Seekers hadn't been as involved in the plays as Harry had been. They had tried, but after the Ravenclaw Seeker got hit hard by a Bludger trying to break up one of the Hufflepuff plays and was nearly knocked unconscious, both had decided they were better off staying out of the way until they could get more practice.

The two teams had been fairly evenly matched throughout the game. With no one possessing any broom superiority it had come down to the player's individual skills and merits. Hufflepuff had better Chasers and a better Seeker, but Ravenclaw's Keeper and Beaters were superior to their opponents.

In the end, Hufflepuff won thanks to the skills of their Seeker, Cedric Diggory. The fourth year possessed incredible talent, Harry had noted during the game. True, Terrence Higgs was no slouch on a broom either, but he had been completely unprepared for the plays Gryffindor had cooked up, and thus hadn't been at the top of his game. When Harry faced Cedric, the boy would already know what to expect. Harry was

looking forward to testing his skills against those of the Hufflepuff's Seeker.

Students would soon be boarding the Hogwarts Express to head back home for the holidays. Harry was looking forward to going back as well. Even though he'd been having fun at school, despite the dangers he found himself in, and in spite of having found people he liked, he still missed Lisa terribly and couldn't wait to spend Christmas with her.

"I won't be doing much over the holidays," Neville admitted as they all sat at the Hufflepuff table eating breakfast. "I'll probably spend most of my time in my greenhouse, then I'll spend Christmas with my uncles, aunts and cousins."

"They're not going to be a problem for you, are they Nev?" asked Harry. He knew the boy's relatives had not been good to Neville, due to how they thought him a squib because he hadn't done any accidental magic until he was eight. He wondered how they would react when they discovered that he was getting mostly E's in all of his classes except for Herbology and Potions, which he had an O in both.

"I don't think so." Neville shook his head. "While Gran was pleased I had done magic, she was pretty angry with Great Uncle Algie for dropping me off a balcony. I don't even know if she'll let him come to our Christmas celebration."

"Yeah, if my Uncle had dropped me off a balcony my mum would probably murder him," Terry said, "but then, mum's always been pretty overprotective of me."

"So what are you doing for Christmas then?"

Terry shrugged.

"I'll probably just spend Christmas with mum and dad. We're not a very big family, and only have a few distant relatives that I've never met before, so there's not going to be a big celebration or anything. We'll probably just have a quiet dinner and open presents the next day."

"At least you're going to have a quiet dinner," Lisa huffed, arms crossed

over her chest, face tightened in annoyance. She sounded jealous of her fellow Ravenclaw. "I'm going to be stuck with my sister for the next two weeks with no escape. Not only will I have to hear her complain about how I'm friends with Harry and she has yet to even meet him, but I'm going to have to listen to her complain about the presents she gets, since nothing mum and dad buy is ever good enough."

"No offense, Lisa, but your sister sounds like a brat," Hannah quipped.

Lisa moaned piteously, shoulders slumped in faux depression.

"Ugh, you don't know the half of it."

"So wait," Neville started, "What are you doing for the holidays, Hannah?"

"The first week my dad's taking me and mum to Italy," Hannah exclaimed excitedly. "He's got some business there but didn't want to be away from us, so he's taking us with him. It's going to be so exciting! I'm hoping mum and I can go shopping for some clothes. Magical Italy has some to die for clothing stores."

"After that she'll probably spend Christmas at my house," Susan said, smiling as she tucked a strand of red hair behind her ear. "The Bones and Abbots have been allies for a while now, and it's become tradition for Hannah to spend the night with me, or I with her, every Christmas. We usually switch off years, and last year I spent the night at her house."

Harry smiled as he let the conversation wash over him. It was interesting to hear what some of his friends would be doing. They were so different, so very diverse.

"What are you doing for Christmas, Harry?" asked Hannah. Everyone looked at the raven-haired boy, who blinked several times before shrugging.

"I'm going to be spending the holidays with Lisa Crawft and her family."

"Your muggle friend, right?" Susan asked.

"Yes. I've spent every Christmas with Lisa and her family since I was

eight. I suppose you could say it's tradition."

Everyone there frowned.

"What about your family?" asked Lisa. Harry gave her a frown.

"What about them?"

"Aren't you going to spend time with them too?"

"No."

The tone he spoke in was so cold that his friends flinched. Harry sighed. He felt guilt creep into his stomach for being so short-fused with them, but he really didn't want to talk about his relatives. He didn't even want to think about his relatives. They weren't his family. They never had been. They were related to him by blood, nothing more, nothing less. Contrary to popular belief, blood was not always thicker than water.

The mixed group of lions, badgers and ravens stared at Harry, a combination of wariness and inquisitiveness, blatantly shown in the furrowing of their brows and the frowns touching their lips. They were clearly curious about why he wouldn't spend time with his relatives for Christmas, and worried about what that might imply. They fortunately dropped the subject, however, and went back to their regular conversation, albeit, their manners were a bit more subdued. Harry was thankful they weren't willing to pry into his personal life. It wasn't that he cared if they knew about his past, but he knew how the human mind worked, and he knew how they would react if they knew how his relatives treated him. He didn't want their pity.

"I'm going skiing in the French Alps," Hermione told them as Lisa asked what she would do for Christmas.

"Isn't that a muggle sport?" Hannah asked, who was the only half-blood besides Harry in the group. Naturally, she knew a bit more about muggles and the non-magical community as a whole, though considering both her parents were magical that wasn't saying much. Her mum might be a muggleborn, but she had not stepped foot into the muggle world since graduating Hogwarts. "I've heard of it, but don't actually know what it is."

"It's where people attached a pair of skis, which is a narrow strip of wood, metal, plastic, or a combination of all three, to their boots, and use them to travel across the snow. Recently it's become very popular as a recreational sport, and my parents have decided to try it out."

"Sounds kind of weird," Neville said, and everyone else seemed to agree.

"That's just because you've never tried it before," Hermione argued, crossing her arms defensively. "For all you know, it could be quite fun. I'm very excited to try it myself."

Conversation would have probably continued along that vein, with the others debating the veracity of how fun sliding down a snow covered mountain could be, when Tracey Davis walked up to their table.

"Harry," she greeted, looking a tad nervous, though whether that was because of the people pointing at her and whispering or something else, Harry couldn't say.

"What's wrong?" he asked, worry creeping into his gut. Something definitely had her nervous. The way she shuffled her feet and light wringing of her hands informed him of her disposition. But she was also worried. Her face was paler than normal, and her eyes weren't anywhere near as vibrant as they usually were.

"Can I talk to you?" Her eyes scanned the table of friends, then flickered over to the other students watching the spectacle and whispering. Only a few people actually knew that Harry and the others were friends with people from Slytherin because neither she nor Blaise had ever eaten with them in the Great Hall, where the vast majority of students could see them. They were no doubt wondering what a snake was doing in their presence. "Alone?"

Harry tilted his head, frowning. His eyes scanned the Slytherin table, and immediately noted something missing. Or more accurately, *someone* missing. He looked back at Tracey, nodded, and stood up.

"Come on," he said, grabbing her hand and leading her out of the Great Hall. Whispers erupted from behind him, but Harry ignored them in favor of finding a quiet place they could talk.

They traveled through several corridors, taking a number of twists and turns that no one but a person with eidetic memory would have any hope of figuring out. It was clear Tracey wanted this conversation to be private, and he was not going to disrespect her desire.

They entered a small, unused classroom. When Harry shut the door, his wand came out and he cast several privacy spells that he had learned, then turned back to Tracey, who eyed him curiously. He eased her mind with a smile.

"Now we can talk without anybody passing by overhearing."

Tracey nodded. She looked curious about his spell knowledge, but was obviously too worried to ask him about them.

"I need your help," she said slowly.

"Is this about Daphne?"

Tracey's eyes widened.

"How did you kn—no, never mind. I should have suspected you would know that's what this is about. You always seem to know."

"Not always." Harry smiled, but it quickly dropped when he saw how worried Tracey was. "However, I did notice that she was not at the Great Hall during breakfast, and that she has been looking very... haggard lately. I suspect she's not been getting much sleep." He looked at Tracey wringing her hands together nervously. "What's the problem, exactly?"

"I... I'm not sure," she said slowly, softly, as if afraid of actually speaking about this to anyone for fear that something bad would happen. "For the past month or so, I've noticed that Daphne's been sneaking out of our dorm. She comes back very early in the morning looking extremely pale and hurt. Not physically hurt," she was quick to add when she realized how her sentence could be construed, "but more like emotionally hurt. I've tried confronting her about it, but she just gives me the cold shoulder and tells me to mind my own business."

Harry frowned. This did sound like a serious issue. From what little he

knew of Daphne, she had always been cold to most people she knew, even Blaise had been snubbed by her several times. But not Tracey. Never Tracey. She was the one person Daphne had never been cold to, from what Harry had seen. In fact, Tracey was the only person he had ever seen who could make the blond pureblood smile. That she was snubbing the girl's friendship now was worrisome, and Harry could not even begin to guess why.

"Several times I woke up when she came in to see her in tears," Tracey said quietly, the hurt and worry in her voice obvious. "Each day she looks worse and worse, like she's wasting away. I don't know what to do anymore."

"And you think I can help." It wasn't a question. "You do know that Daphne hates me, right? What makes you think I can help where her best friend couldn't?"

"She doesn't hate you." Tracey seemed adamant on this point. She always had been, and Harry couldn't begin to guess why. "She's just... she doesn't like getting close to others. I got lucky. I was her friend before she became like this, and by the time she became cold she simply couldn't push me away. But now..." she trailed off and shook her head. The girl looked close to tears, that was how worried she was for her friend.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"I'll see what I can do," he began. Tracey gave him a hopeful look, and he quickly made to say something before she could get too happy. "Don't get your hopes up. Honestly, I don't know if I can do any good. She may just rebuff me like she did you. All I'm saying is that I'll try and help your friend."

"I believe in you," Tracey told him, "If anyone can help her, it's you. You have a way with people that I've not seen in anyone else. It's hard to describe, but I just know that if anyone can get Daphne to open up, it will you."

Harry didn't say anything. What she said held a modicum of truth. He had always been good at persuading people to see his way of thinking, even

if they didn't necessarily agree with it. It was a skill he had gained through reading books on psychology and practicing on the people around: his peers, Lisa's father, the Dursleys, Lisa's father, his teacher's, Lisa's father, and let's not forget, Lisa's father. In fact, it was partially because of his skills in persuasion that Mr. Crawft continued to let him see Lisa, even when the man clearly wanted to never let him see his daughter again.

Well, that, and the fact that his wife would be cross with him if he stopped letting Harry come over. That woman was more frightening than Voldemort when mad.

Still, he didn't know if that talent would be of any help here. It only worked if the other person was willing to listen. If Daphne just rebuffed his attempts and ignored him, there wasn't much he could do.

And yet, Harry felt he had to do something, he had to at least try, and not just because Tracey asked for his help. This could be the only chance he would get to bring Daphne to his side, and he needed to take it. An alliance with the House of Greengrass would benefit him greatly for when he graduated Hogwarts.

"Don't worry," Harry said, "I'll do everything I can to help your friend."

The smile Tracey gave him could've put the sun to shame.

XoX

Many people would think that tracking someone in a castle as large as Hogwarts would be impossible. Hogwarts played host to hundreds of rooms, many of which were unused. Finding one person in the many hundreds of rooms was like trying to find a wand at Ollivanders, a long and arduous process indeed.

Many of those people were not Harry Potter.

Harry walked with quiet, confident footsteps down one the many corridors. It was late at night and no one was around. He knew that Filch and his cat were currently prowling around the library at the moment, and several students and teachers were on this floor in the West Wing. No one else was anywhere near his current position.

No one else except for one person.

Harry stopped in front of a partially opened door. All the other doors were closed shut. Whoever had opened it had been in a rush, or was just not very thorough at covering their tracks. Harry believed it to be the former.

Sniffling came from the other end, soft, almost silent crying that contained a distinctly feminine quality. He recognized the voice. Even if it possessed none of the cold, aristocratic tones he'd grown used to. As silently as he could, Harry pushed the door partway open and peered inside.

Daphne Greengrass was there, sitting in front of a mirror, knees drawn up to her chest and arms wrapped tightly around them, as she stared into a mirror with a look of so much pain and longing that Harry actually hesitated with his plan. How could he even think of strong-arming this girl into revealing her secrets? How could he so selfishly use her for his own purposes when she was clearly hurting?

But then, this wasn't just about his alliance with the House of Greengrass, was it? This was about Tracey's worry for her friend as well. And besides, the girl needed help. That much was clear to him. Anything that could crack her mask of ice was obviously serious. Harry didn't know this girl, but a part of him, the part he often suppressed, didn't like seeing her suffer.

He opened the door a little more and silently slipped inside. Apparently not silent enough. Daphne heard his footsteps, or perhaps the door opening. It didn't matter, either way she jumped to her feet, a startled expression on her face.

That expression faded into one of animosity when her eyes landed on Harry.

"Potter," she said coldly, or tried to. Her voice cracked halfway through, containing within it a raw emotion that she couldn't hide. It was a testimony to how horrible she must be feeling that her emotions were so easily visible. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Harry replied somewhat dryly. Daphne

tried to sneer, but the effect was ruined by her bloodshot eyes and the tear tracks staining her cheeks. "But I suspect you are here for the same reason I am, exploring the castle. Though..." he tilted his head toward the mirror, "It looks like you've found something interesting to hold your attention. Have you been coming here often?"

"Bugger off, Potter." Daphne's voice still hadn't managed to retain its normal coldness. In fact, it sounded more frightened discover? Or was it something else?

"Normally I would." Harry walked further into the room. "I know you don't like me, and I try to respect your desire not to get close because of that, but unfortunately, I can't keep away this time. You see, I've noticed that you haven't been looking very well for a while now and, well, I've been a bit worried, to be honest."

"You've been worried about me?" Daphne blinked in confusion several times. She shook her head. The sneer tried to find its place on her features again but failed. "I don't believe you. Why would you be worried about me?"

"Because you're Tracey's friend," was the answer she got, "and she's been worried about you."

"Did Tracey set you up to this?" Daphne's voice suddenly grew rigid and a bit shrill. "I told her to mind her own business, and instead she goes behind my back and asks you to help me!"

"Don't you think this is her business?" asked Harry, interrupting Daphne and taking another step forward. The blond pureblood took a step back. "You're her friend, and she's incredibly worried about you. Besides, what makes you think she asked me for help? She knows that if you won't talk to her, it's very unlikely you'll talk to me."

He took another step toward Daphne and she took another step back, eyeing him warily. He noticed she had tightened her hand around her wand.

"Why else would you be here if not because of Tracey?" asked Daphne. There fear in her voice rang clearly this time. She wasn't even trying to

mask it anymore. "She's the only one who could have told you that I've been sneaking out at night."

"It doesn't take a genius to figure out that you haven't been getting much sleep." Harry walked toward Daphne who lifted her wand and pointed it at him.

"Stay back!" She shouted, her voice now terrified. Of what, Harry didn't know. Perhaps of him finding out her secrets, or maybe anyone finding out her secrets. He didn't have enough information to actually make an accurate guess.

Harry didn't heed her words and kept walking towards her. She wouldn't fire. Couldn't bring herself to curse him. He could see it in her eyes and the way her wand arm shook. Harry kept walking forward, closing in on the girl who had backed up against the wall.

"I said stay back!"

Harry stopped right in front of her. The shaking wand poked against his chest. She looked absolutely petrified. Her eyes were wide and frightened, and the redness in her bloodshot eyes only worsened the expression. It made her face look like something out of a horror movie. Her lips trembled as she tried to put on a brave front and failed. Her breathing grew heavy. She looked close to hyperventilating.

Harry felt a stab of... something, he couldn't tell what, the emotion eluded him, but he felt something powerful for the girl before him. Something he had never felt for anyone else, not even Lisa. What must she be suffering through to be like this? How much had she endured that her carefully crafted mask could be shattered so easily? What kind of terrible secrets did she have that forced that mask to be crafted in the first place?

He lifted his arm and grabbed Daphne's shaking hand in his own and pushed it down. With it, the girl seemed to lose all of strength. Her knees gave out and her back slid down the wall. No longer did Daphne hold any resemblance to the icy cold Slytherin he was so used to seeing. Now she just looked like a lost little girl who no longer had the strength to carry on.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Daphne, her voice cracking. There were

no tears, but it looked like there might be soon. "What do you want?"

Harry knelt down so he could look the girl in the eye. There was no need to fake the look of warmth this time. It came to him naturally, even if Harry did not realize it.

"To help."

Daphne stared at him for the longest time, her mouth parted slightly and her eyes wide and searching. Seconds that seemed like hours passed as she studied him in a way she had never done before. Harry did not dare look away from her for even a second. He kept his gaze on hers, his killing curse green irises locked onto her icy-blues, letting her search for whatever she was hoping to see

"You're not going to leave me alone until I tell you, are you?" she asked, her tone resigned.

"Probably not," Harry agreed.

Daphne sighed softly, then went silent. Harry let the silence stretch out. He couldn't force her to say anything. It had to come from her on her own time.

"For a long time, my family had always been a very happy one," Daphne started. "My mother was incredibly kind and sweet and gentle, she would always tuck me in and tell me a story before I went to bed, and would leave me with a kiss goodnight. And my father would always spoil me whenever he had the chance, taking me out, buying me gifts, and getting me out of trouble with mum when I got caught doing something I shouldn't have. Even when my sister came into the picture, they still made time for me."

Harry remained silent. In his mind he could almost picture the scene she painted for him. A mother that looked like an adult version of the girl before him, beautiful and kind, a father who was nice and mischievous, acting stern in front of his wife when she told him what their little girl had been doing, then giving the girl a thumbs up behind the wife's back. And a little sister, probably similar to the mother as well, acting much like Lisa did with him. It was beautiful scene, exactly what a family should be.

"We were very happy, the three of us. Even though our mother had only produced girls, my father didn't care, and he would always brag about us to the company he often entertained and when he went out to Ministry functions. At least, that's what mum always told me."

Harry frowned. Pureblood houses were patriarchal in nature, he knew. It was an old, outdated tradition, one that the pureblood community had fought very hard to keep even as the rest of world moved forward. To have a daughter and no sons was a problem for any House. Her father sounded like a good man.

"It was a few years after Astoria was born, when I was five years-old, that mum became pregnant again. This is very rare for wizarding families. Most pureblood's only have one or two children because of how stressful birthing a magical baby is on the wife. It's not unusual for the third or sometimes even the second child to be born a squib because of it."

Harry knew about the low magical child birth rates among wizarding families. According to Andromeda, there was a debate going on about inbreeding among pureblood's being the cause. Naturally, most of those debates were stamped out before they could gain momentum, but they did crop up from time to time.

On a side note, the Weasley family seemed exempt from this rule.

Daphne smiled, a soft smile of someone reminiscing about better times.

"None of us cared, though. We were just so happy to have another person coming into the family. He didn't say anything, but I know father was hoping to have a son, someone to take over for him when he grew too old to be the head of the family. I didn't care about that, I just wanted a little brother to spoil and tease like I did my sister."

Harry almost chuckled, but didn't for fear that it would make Daphne lose her nerve.

"I remember the night mum's water broke well," she said softly. "We were having dinner when she started having contractions. I had been too young to remember when Astoria was born, but I remembered this time." She grimaced. "They looked painful. My mum was hurting and there was

nothing I could do to help. She was rushed to Saint Mungos by our father while I had to stay home and look after Astoria with our house elf."

She took a shuddering breath, and Harry realized they were coming to the hard part of her story. He thought about holding her hand to comfort her, but didn't think she would appreciate it.

"Dad came back the next morning." Daphne shivered and it wasn't from the cold. "He looked... he looked so dead. Like all the life had been sucked out of him. I remember asking what was wrong and where mum was and he told me to go to my room." Her voice cracked. "I had never seen him act so cold before then."

Daphne stopped talking then. A few tears tried to escape her eyes. But she stubbornly refused to let them fall. As the silence stretched out, Harry wasn't sure if she was going to continue.

"I later found out that mother had a miscarriage," she said at last, her voice cracking. "And the strain from trying to birth another magical child had killed her." The tears that had refused to leak were coming out now. Daphne wiped at them futilely. Harry conjured a small handkerchief and gave it to her. She did not thank him, but she didn't turn it away either.

"There's more to it than that, isn't there." There was no questioning tone in Harry's voice. From what he had seen so far, something like this would not have been enough to hurt Daphne, not permanently, not enough to make her create that cold mask he had always seen her wearing. There had to be something else.

"Figured that on your own, did you?" The tone was probably meant to be biting, but Daphne was too emotional to accomplish it. She sighed. "You're right, there is more to it than that."

"What happened?"

Daphne looked at Harry again, searching. Then her eyes closed and she leaned her head back against the cold stone wall.

"I didn't just lose my mum and soon-to-be little brother that day," she said, her voice exhausted. "I also lost my dad. From that day on, father

became cold, unfeeling, he no longer cared for me or my sister. It was like a part of him had died that day with mum, and all that was left was this cold, bitter and resentful man."

"Did he take his loss out on you?" asked Harry. He knew that there were cases where a parent would blame their child for their spouse's death. It was wrong, but it did happen. And child abuse was not as uncommon as most people might think.

"Not in the way you might be thinking, and he didn't take it out on my sister," she said bitterly. "With his wife gone, there was no chance for him to gain a son. He could have married another woman, of course, but he wouldn't. And I don't think any woman would have wanted to marry the person he became."

She shook her head, realizing she was getting off topic.

"That made me the heiress of House Greengrass. And so he began to train me, at the tender age of five, on how to be a proper *pureblood* woman."

Harry noted the disdain she said *pureblood* with. This, he decided, was where her most bitter memories lay.

"He was a harsh teacher. Brutal almost." She paused, her eyes dulling as she remembered those obviously horrible times. "He always expected perfection in everything I did. If I got something wrong, or if I did something incorrectly, he would have me write... lines."

Harry frowned when Daphne shuddered. He wasn't sure what to think, but he had a feeling there was a hidden meaning when she mentioned her father making her write lines.

"But I was never good enough for him. No matter how hard I tried or how much I worked it was never enough to earn his praise or recognition. Every time I got something right, every time I perfected what he taught me, it was always 'if you were a boy this wouldn't be necessary' or 'if only I had a son' or even 'why couldn't you be born male.'" She gave a bitter laugh that sounded harsh and brittle to his ears. No child should be capable of producing such a defeated tone. "For years I would try so hard

to gain his approval, his praise, but I could never get it, I could never be good enough for him because I'm not a boy."

The scorn in her voice became mixed with indefinable sadness, and Harry could see why. He couldn't imagine what it must be like to have a father who hated him simply because of his gender. Worse still, for that father to be the same man who had shown her love and kindness before, the man who hadn't cared that she was female, probably made it that much more heartbreaking.

He could see why she had grown so cold. Why she wore a mask.

Harry's eyes softened into one of pain and regret as he looked at her.

"I'm sorry."

Daphne's eyes flashed. Her gaze sharpened, and suddenly she was on her feet, forcing Harry to jump back.

"I don't need your pity, Potter!" she snarled. "Don't think for one second that I need your sympathy or pity! I've been dealing with this for seven years without pity, and I don't need it now! Especially not from *you*!"

"Pity?" Harry's voice rose and his expression turned thunderous. "Is that what you think? You think I pity you? If so, then you're a fool!"

"What did you call me?" Daphne hissed, her tone seething at his audacity.

"You heard me." Harry's tone was cold. "You're a fool if you think I would pity you in any way. I don't like receiving pity from others and I certainly wouldn't give it to anyone else, especially when they neither want nor need it."

"Oh? Well, you certainly could have fooled me," Daphne bit out sarcastically. "If you don't feel pity for me, then what do you feel? Sympathy? Clemency? Philanthropy? It's all the same in my eyes, and I don't need them either."

"How about my respect?"

Whatever cutting remark Daphne may have said died in her throat. For the first time since they had met she looked surprised. Not frightened surprised. Just surprised. Like what Harry just said was the last thing she had ever expected to hear from him or anyone else.

"You... respect me?" she blinked. The words sounded unfamiliar to her, as if she had never had anyone respect her before.

"Yes," Harry said.

"I..." Daphne suddenly looked uncertain. Lost. She shuffled her feet, her gaze flickering to the side. "I don't understand," she said in a low tone, "why would you respect me? And after all I've done and said to you. How could you possibly respect me after that?"

"Because you're strong."

Daphne's eyes snapped back to him, widening. Harry walked back over to her, stopping just a foot from where she stood. The blond pureblood didn't move from her spot, so great was her shock.

"You've been through a horrible experience," Harry continued, his voice soft as he let his honest respect for her shine through. "Something no child should ever experience. You've suffered in ways I can't even comprehend, that I don't *want* to comprehend. Yet you can still function as if you were normal."

Well, almost normal. She hid her damage well, but she was still damaged. It was clear to him that this wound she suffered from had never really healed. But that just made him respect her more.

"You managed to suffer through an abusive father and come out stronger for it. And you think I would pity you? No, Daphne, I admire you."

Daphne's eyes had gone impossibly wide. The once icy blue chips that looked at him as if he were dirt to be wiped off her shoes disappeared. Her eyes, so blue, and clearer than the sky itself on a bright summer day, now looked vulnerable.

"To be honest," Harry continued, stepping forward just a bit more.

Daphne didn't take a step back from him. "I don't know if I could be as strong as you."

"I..." Daphne shook her head, "I don't understand."

"Not many people know this," Harry sighed, "in fact, I'm sure that no one in the wizarding world except a select few know what I am about to tell you, but I did not grow up in the wizarding world. All those stories of me living in a grand, magical castle and being taught by some of the most powerful witches and wizards are a lie. I've never gone on any of the adventures that have been written in those stories you've seen in Flourish and Blotts, never slain dragons or fought trolls, never traveled to Africa to kill a Nundu or Ireland to battle against Banshees. I grew up in the muggle world, not even knowing of my fame, never suspecting that people everywhere were proclaiming me the Boy-Who-Lived."

Daphne stared at him like she had never seen him before. Her nose scrunched up cutely and she seemed to struggle with what she had been told. Finally, her face cleared up and she looked at him.

"You grew up in the muggle world?"

Harry nodded.

"I did."

"With muggles?"

"Well, I don't think any witches and wizards would willingly live in the muggle world, and my... relatives certainly displayed no aptitude for magic."

"How come no one knew this?" Daphne asked, her brows crinkling in thought. "And why are you telling me this?"

"I can't answer the first question," Harry shrugged helplessly, "I have no clue why no one knew where I lived myself. As to the second, that is much easier to answer. Everyone thinks I'm some pampered prince raised in loving home and trained by a multitude of powerful witches and wizards. They also seem to be under the impression that I have an ego

the size of Draco Mafloy's."

Daphne's lips twitched into a smile. She schooled herself, albeit, much more slowly than normal, but Harry had seen it. A real, honest to god smile. And in spite of the tear tracks on her cheeks, the redness in her eyes, and the small amount of fluids that had dried under her nose, he couldn't help but think that he rather liked her smile.

"A lot of people have this common misconception of me, of how I grew up, when they couldn't be more wrong. The truth is that I never grew up loved and pampered. My relatives were horrible. They hated magic in every form. To them, it was unnatural, something to be hated and shunned, and because it they shunned me. They wanted to, in their words, stamp the magic out of me."

Daphne's eyes grew wide again, and he gave her a mirthless smile that made her flinch.

"And they tried, they tried so hard to stamp it out. When I was younger, I used to live in a small broom cupboard under the stairs. And when I got old enough, they made me do all of their chores. I cooked, I cleaned, I did the gardening, I mowed the lawn, I washed the car, I did the laundry, and when I didn't perform up to their expectations, they made sure to let their... displeasure known." Harry closed his eyes and heaved a deep sigh. "When they weren't forcing me to work for them, they made me stay inside of my broom cupboard and tried to pretend I didn't exist. I was isolated, alone and hated. Many times I wished someone would come and take me away, but I eventually learned it was a pipe dream, and that if I wanted things to change, I would have to make that change happen myself."

Harry's eyelids opened again. Green met blue. He studied Daphne as she looked at him, worrying her lower lip between her teeth.

"I see," she said softly at last, "I guess we're not so different, you and I."

"Not very different at all," Harry agreed, "except you're stronger."

Daphne looked down at her shoes, her face uncertain, shy almost.

"I'm not that strong."

"I beg to differ." Her eyes peered at him from beneath golden strands of hair. He smiled at her. "I may have suffered, but at least I hold the knowledge that those people, my relatives, have always hated me. I never knew their love, to them I was just burden, something they had to take in for fear they were being watched. But you're different. It's much easier to grow up with something you never had than it is to grow up when something you cherish is taken away from you. You knew the love of your father, knew what it felt like to have his love, his affection, his understanding and compassion. And you had that love, along with your father and mother ripped away in a single night. I don't know if I could have survived after having the love of my parents suddenly taken away from me."

He did not mention that, in a way, that did happen to him. But the loss of his parents was much easier to digest. He had might have lost his mother and father, but he had not lost his parents love. They had loved him enough to die for him, and he was sure they still loved him even from beyond the grave. If there was such a thing as heaven, he believed quite firmly that they were watching him right now, looking over him where ever they were.

Daphne was silent, contemplative. She looked at him, studying him with keen eyes, and Harry couldn't help but wonder about what she was thinking. What was going through her mind.

"Perhaps," she began. A soft smile lit her face and, surprisingly, it stayed there, "But then, perhaps not. No one can really know how they would react if they were in a similar situation. You can never know what would have happened if you had been in my shoes. Who knows. Maybe you would have come out stronger than me." She looked back down at her shoes. "Maybe you wouldn't have become as cold as me."

Harry didn't think so. Not with the way his memory worked. It had been hard on Daphne, but had their situation been reversed, it would have been much worse for him. He knew he wouldn't have survived wholly intact if he had to relive what she had every single night he went to bed, if he was forced to watch his father grow harsh and bitter, to turn from the

man who once loved him into a man whose only concern seemed to be molding him into the perfect pureblood, the perfect tool.

"Maybe," he said at last, though he didn't sound convinced. Daphne's smile grew just a little wider.

"Definitely."

They stood there for a moment. Daphne's smile was infectious, and Harry soon found himself offering her a small smile in return.

"So," she started curiously, "Just what were you apologizing to me for?"

XoX

Harry watched Daphne leave the room in lighter spirits. When he asked if she needed someone to walk her back to her dorm, she had scoffed and told him she would be fine. Her smile had belayed her words. However, while he seemed to have helped the blond pureblood with her problem, he was having his own problems now.

Why had he been so open with her? He didn't understand. Why had he told her about his first five years with the Dursley's? What possessed him to even mention them? Harry rarely ever did something without a higher purpose. Even when he had first started gathering friends they had not been friends, but allies he needed to create his power base at Hogwarts. Them becoming friends was merely a side effect of being in such close proximity and learning about them as people. It hadn't been intentional, it just happened.

But this. There was no purpose to this. No purpose in revealing one of his secrets, much less something so personal. Not even Lisa knew just how poorly he had been treated for the first five years of his life at the Dursleys residence.

Yet he had told Daphne in spite of the fact that they didn't even know each other. Despite how the few times they had spoken, she had been cold and unfeeling and uncaring and rude. So why?

He closed his eyes, deliberating. Could it have been because she

understood him? He had seen the look in her eyes. There had been no pity, no sympathy when he spoke of his past, only understanding. It was the kind of understanding one could only gain from having undergone a similar hardship. Harry wouldn't deny that after hearing her story he felt some form of kinship with her. While their pasts may not necessarily be similar, they had both suffered in their own way and come out stronger for it.

Could that be it? Could he have revealed a piece of his past, something he had kept to himself for so long, because she could understand what he went through? It was one possibility, and just as likely as any other theory his overly analytical mind might conceive, but it still didn't make sense.

Harry took in a deep breath and blew it out as he decided not to think about it. Or at least, not let it control him. He knew that this would bother him until he could figure it out, but there were other things that needed to be done, and he couldn't stay in this room forever.

Opening his eyes, Harry found himself looking at the mirror. It was very beautiful, with an ornate golden frame adorned with sparkling gems embedded along its length, elegant motifs creating intricate and beautiful patterns, and clawed feet holding it up. At the top was an inscription, written backwards.

"I show not your face but your hearts desire," Harry read out loud. He snorted. "How quaint."

Deciding to see what the words meant, Harry stepped up to the mirror. A sharp intake of breath was the only sound he made as he stared at what lay before him.

Was this what Daphne saw when she looked into the mirror? No. Of course not. Her hearts desire was not his hearts desire. What she saw would be different. He could already imagine what she must have seen in this mirror, and knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it was this mirror which had caused her so much grief.

First the Cerberus guarding a valuable object on the third floor corridor and now this? What was Dumbledore thinking? Putting something like

this in a place it could be so easily found?

He took a step away from the mirror. The image before him vanished and the mirror became just a mirror. Woodenly, he walked toward the door and stepped out. After closing the door behind him, he cast a locking charm and an overpowered notice-me-not charm. The locking charm would keep those above third year out, and the notice-me-not was powerful enough to keep anyone whose will was weaker than his own from noticing it. That mirror was dangerous, he decided, and should not be found by anyone.

As he walked back to his dormitory, Harry's mind raced with possibilities as he tried to discern the reason Dumbledore would leave such a dangerous artifact out in the open.

HAPPY FRICKEN NEW YEAR EVERYBODY! I hope you all enjoyed the new year festivities and got yourselves ridiculously drunk. If not, that's ok too, so long as you had fun. Now, before we begin I would just like to thank all the awesome people who reviewed my last chapter. It's you guys that keep me going.

I know a lot of people were looking forward to finding out why Daphne acted like she had a large stick up her ass. Well, now you know.

Hopefully you guys enjoyed the chapter. If not, I'll go find some place to cry. If you have anything you would like to say, anything at all (I would prefer being told how awesome I am, but that's just me) say it in a review and I'll definitely see it.

A Heartfelt Homecoming

A Heartfelt Homecoming

The morning when students would be going home for the holidays soon arrived. Harry, Hermione and Neville made it to the Great Hall, where they would have breakfast with their friends before boarding the Hogwarts express.

Harry hadn't really packed much to return home with; he only planned on bringing his wands plus a few books for light reading. Since this would be the first time since he and Lisa had seen each other in several months, he had decided that he would spend the majority of his time with her, thus there wasn't really a need for him to bring much.

They were sitting at the Hufflepuff table today. As always, Neville sat on Harry's left, and was joined by Susan sitting on his right, while Lisa sat next to the red-haired Hufflepuff. On the other side Hannah sat directly across from Susan, with Hermione on her left and Terry on her right, completing the group of seven.

Conversation flowed all around them. The Great Hall appeared filled to capacity, something that only happened during the beginning of the year feast and holidays. Harry could see many students talking, and while he could not hear them, managed to correctly presume they were discussing what they would be doing over the holidays, much the like the group he sat with were doing.

He went back to his food, taking a bite of his eggs and sighed. While a lot of the food made at Hogwarts tasted very good, especially breakfasts, which consisted of French toast, bacon, sausage, pancakes and hash browns, he didn't really have any desire to eat this kind of food. It had been something he put up with because, in the end, it was a very minor problem and he wanted to complete his politically-oriented goals before worrying about what he ate for breakfast. But that was no longer the case now, and he planned on finding the kitchens when he came back to see if he couldn't convince the chef to cook a larger variety of foods, preferably

the healthier kind of variety.

Near the end of breakfast, Albus Dumbledore stood from his seat and moved to stand in front of the staff table. The students quieted down quite quickly, many wondering what Dumbledore had to say.

"I just have a few last minute instructions to all those who are heading home for the holidays. When you are finished with your meal, please head into the Entrance Hall where Mr. Filch will begin directing you to the carriages. I hope you have enjoyed the year so far, and that you have a Happy Christmas and New Year."

Soon after the headmaster's speech, the students stood up and began leaving. Harry made his way to the Entrance Hall with his friends. It was crowded and there was a lot of bumping and jostling as some of the older students tried pushing their way through the throng of people, as if getting on a carriage faster would help them get home faster. Somehow, Harry and his friends managed to keep themselves from getting separated.

"Harry!"

At the sound of his name being called, Harry turned along with the others to see Tracey Davis, Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass making a B-line to them. They carefully waded through several groups, using their smaller size to their advantage in order to continue moving closer to him.

"Hi!" Tracey greeted brightly as she and the other two stopped in front of them. Harry saw that she seemed much happier now than she a few days ago, perhaps even happier than she had been since the start of the school year. At her left stood Blaise, who looked the same as always, taciturn and mostly silent. The stoic boy offered him a nod, which Harry returned a little absentmindedly. His eyes only spared them a flicker before focusing on the last member of their group.

Daphne looked a lot better than she had been the last time he saw her. Of course, better was a very relative term. She still looked exhausted. Harry could see the slight bags under her eyes, even though she tried hiding them with a well-crafted charm. Still, while clearly still suffering from exhaustion, she did look better. Her eyes no longer held the haunted

look they held before their confrontation, and her face didn't seem like a sleet of ice, cold and unforgiving. It looked softer now, warmer.

His preliminary observation complete, Harry smiled at the three before they could take notice of his staring.

"Morning Tracey, Blaise, Daphne." He greeted, his head tilting, "Looking forward to heading home for the holidays?"

"You bet I am!" Was Tracey's exuberant declaration. Harry was quite sure that her excitement had less to do with returning home for Christmas and more to do with her blond friend. Her happiness was proof the two had made up and that Daphne was on the mend.

"I wonder what she's so excited about," Hannah whispered into Lisa's ear as the group now consisting of nine continued moving forward. "I mean, she looked really depressed just a few days ago. Now she looks like she can take on the whole world."

"Who knows," was Lisa's response.

Harry shook his head as the two spoke. His other friends also seemed a bit perplexed by Tracey's strange attitude reversal.

Well, he wouldn't be the one to tell them anything. Whatever happened between Tracey and Daphne was no bodies business but their own.

With the trio of Slytherin's in tow, Harry and the others made it outside of Hogwarts and descended down the small path toward the carriages.

"This Christmas is going to be totally awesome," Tracey said to them as they descended the small sloped, dirt path. The carriages were closer to the gates that kept Hogwarts separated from Hogsmeade. "I think I might finally have worn my parents down enough for them to buy me a new broom. My old Cleansweep is nice and all, but it's so, you know, old. I doubt I'll get a Nimbus 2000 or anything like that, but I'm at least hoping to get a 1700."

"That's still a pretty expensive broom," Terry pointed out. "Don't the Nimbus 1700's sell for something like 2,500 galleons? I don't even think

all the presents I'll be getting combined would equal that."

"Yeah, but my parents are probably better off than yours," Tracey started, before she realized how insulting her words sounded. She quickly began to backtrack. "What I mean is my parents are pretty successful and make a lot of money. Of course, I don't know how much money your parents make, so maybe their richer than mine."

"Must you always put your foot in your mouth, Tracey?" asked Daphne, her tone still somewhat cool, but nowhere near as bad as before. If there was a temperature that could be used to describe her tone, Harry would say it was lukewarm, though the added sarcasm made it hard to tell. Still, the mere fact that she was now speaking could only mean she was beginning to warm up to Harry and everyone else. At least he hoped so.

The mild glare Tracey sent was ruined by her pout.

"So this is something she does a lot then?" Hannah asked a tad uncertainly. She seemed slightly wary of Daphne, not that Harry could really blame her, given how the pureblood Slytherin acted before.

"She's been like this almost as long as I can remember," Daphne said dryly, completely ignoring the betrayed look her friend sent her. "I think she picked it up from her father. He has a rather bad habit of saying stupid things in front of his wife and getting into trouble for it."

"Revealing my bad habits like that is so not cool, Daphne," Tracey muttered with a small glare, cheeks puffed up indignantly. Daphne merely eyed her brunette friend with a blank look, though Harry thought he detected a hint of teasing warmth in her eyes.

"It could be genetic," Harry commented, causing all eyes to turn his way.

"Genetic?" Susan asked, curious about the unfamiliar term.

"It means hereditary," Hermione started before Harry could begin to explain, "it's a trait that's passed down from parent to child. A good example would be a person's eye or hair color. You wouldn't normally see a child with blond hair if both of their parents had brown hair, or blue eyes if neither parent possessed blue eyes. Some people even think that

certain personality traits are passed on through genetics, though that hasn't been proven yet."

Daphne frowned at the muggleborn witch, before leaning over so she could whisper into Tracey's ear.

"Does she always do that?"

"Sometimes," Tracey answered. Daphne gave an almost silent grunt.

"It's kind of annoying."

"You'll get used to it." Daphne's friend smiled. "At least she's smart. We could have picked worse people to spend time with." She paused, then added, "and Harry says crap like that just as much, if not more than Hermione does anyway."

Daphne's eyes caught Harry's. He tilted his head for a moment, then smiled at her, causing the blond pureblood to offer a small, uncertain smile in return. It only lasted on her face for a second, not long enough for anybody but Harry to notice.

"Yes," she said softly, "I suppose you're right."

They soon reached the carriages, and Harry found himself staring at what were quite possibly the strangest creatures he had ever seen: a pair of strange winged horses, their hooves stomping lightly against the ground, their leathery skin brown and coarse. They possessed a skeletal body that made them look anorexic, as if they'd not eaten for months. Large wings protruded from their back, currently folded. If Harry had to guess, he would say they had at least a ten foot wingspan. Their faces did not look like a horses, but appeared reptilian in nature.

Curiosity overcoming him, Harry changed direction and headed toward the creatures. What were these strange horses? Having not really looked up anything on magical creatures, Harry did not have the foggiest idea of what these things were.

They seemed to sense his presence as he neared them. The one closest to him turned its head and looked at him with strangely placid eyes. Harry

raised a hand over the winged horse's snout slowly, letting it know he wasn't a threat. It nudged his hand, letting Harry know that he could pet it, he guessed. He slowly ran his hand over its rough, leathery skin. It definitely felt nothing like petting a horse, he mused.

"What are you doing, Potter?"

Turning his head, Harry saw Daphne and the others staring at him with a concerned expression. Well, the others looked concerned, it was hard to tell with her, as aside from the slight downturn of her lips, her face remained completely neutral.

Harry tilted his head in confusion.

"Just petting these strange horses?"

"Horses?" Daphne's frown deepened as she looked at him. Behind her, the other members of their group grew even more concerned. Harry frowned.

"The ones pulling the carriage."

"Harry," Hermione said uncertainly, "there's nothing pulling the carriages."

"Nothing?" Harry looked at the group, then back at the horse he was petting. He tried discerning what this meant, but came up blank. He looked over at the group again. "Are you telling me none of you can see them?"

"See what?" Blaise asked, eyes narrowing slightly at the raven-haired boy. Harry wondered what the Italian pureblood was thinking about, but figured he was trying to decide whether Harry was actually looking at something they couldn't see or simply hallucinating.

He wondered. If they couldn't see them, did that mean they couldn't feel them either? There was only one way to find out.

"Here." Harry took Daphne's hand in his own, eliciting the first true showing of emotion from her, surprise, and walked back up to the front of the carriage.

"What are you doing?" Daphne asked, shocked by the act of him grabbing her hand so casually. He wondered if this was the first bit of human contact she'd had with anyone aside from Tracey and Blaise in a while, but dismissed the thought and put her hand on the winged horse's snout. Daphne's eyes widened.

"You feel it, yes?" asked Harry. Daphne nodded slowly as she let Harry move her hand up and down the creature's snout.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice a soft whisper. There was emotion in that voice. Wonder.

"I don't know." Harry shrugged helplessly. "It looks like a skeletal winged horse with leathery skin. I've never seen anything like it, and I haven't looked up anything on magical creatures." Except for trolls, because, well, when one almost kills you it's only natural to study the thing, just in case you have to face one again.

"Thestrals," Lisa said, her eyes widening, "You can see Thestrals? And their pulling the carriage?"

"Thestrals?" Harry inquired, removing his hand from Daphne's. The blond blinked for a moment, frowned, then removed her hand from the Thestral's snout.

"It's a breed of winged horse," Lisa explained. "They're very rare, and are considered dangerous by the Ministry. I think it's because a lot of people consider them a bad omen."

"Why are they a bad omen?" asked Hannah, eyeing the front of the carriage with curiosity and uncertainty.

"Because only those who have seen death can see them."

All eyes turned to Harry, who suddenly felt uncomfortable under the stares. Of course he would be the only one to see something like that, seeing as he had been forced to watch Voldemort kill his mother. And naturally he would discover a breed of horse that only people who had seen someone die could see, while everyone else in the vicinity and heard the explanation as well. Honestly, first the troll, then a cursed

broom, followed by a Cerberus at school, then the Mirror of Erisad and its dark secret, and that's not even going into everything that happened before going to Hogwarts. It was enough to make him wonder if he'd accrued some really bad karma, and if so, wonder what he'd done to deserve it.

"I'm surprised you know that," Harry said, hoping to bring the attention off him. It didn't quite work, but at least it got Lisa talking again.

"Back in ancient times, Roman battle mages used Thestrals for aerial bombardment against invading armies and storming castles."

"Ah." Harry nodded, noticing that most of his friends were still looking at him. And that a lot of them were pitying. Hannah, Susan and Tracey seemed especially compassionate, with teary eyes and everything. Neville looked a tad faint. Terry seemed a bit more composed, but still gave him a sad look, and Blaise shifted to study Harry better. The only one not giving him pity was Daphne, who simply looked curious and maybe a bit remorseful, as if she had misjudged him in some way.

He shifted again, fighting against the scowl threatening to creep on his face.

"Well," he said with forced cheerfulness, "why don't we get on the carriages, hmm?"

It wasn't the best subtle maneuvering he'd ever done. It wasn't even subtle at all. But if nothing else, it worked. Harry and his friends boarded two carriages. They weren't that large, and would only fit about two to a seat. Somehow, the one Harry ended up in managed to fit three, with Tracey and Daphne squeezing in next to him, while Terry and Neville sat opposite of them.

The carriage began moving. Harry was very grateful that Daphne sat next to him. Out of all his friends, only she hadn't looked at him with pity, and she neatly blocked the view of Tracey, who kept sending him the occasional sad glance.

Unfortunately, she couldn't do anything about the looks Terry and Neville sent, but it was better than having all three of them staring at him.

By the time they arrived at Hogsmeade, where the Hogwarts Express sat waiting, smoke billowing from the front, the sad and pitying stares ceased, for the most part. He knew they were probably curious about who he had seen die, since they most likely believed he'd been too young to remember his parents' death. They could keep thinking that. He wouldn't be telling them that he could see Thestrals because he did, in fact, remember the death of his mum and dad.

The group of nine moved with the flow of students and entered the gold and scarlet steam engine. It wasn't until they started looking for an empty compartment that Hannah pointed out the problem.

"Who's going to sit with who? We can't all sit in the same compartment. There's not enough room."

"Don't worry about that," Harry replied confidently, "I figured this would be a problem, so I did some reading ahead in Charms and found a spell that will help us."

Everyone shared a curious glance, all of them wondering the same thing. Just when did Harry look up this spell? What exactly was this spell? And, of course, what did this mystery spell do and how would it help them fit into one compartment? There were nine people, and compartments could only carry, at most, six. They may be able to squeeze eight people in since they were first years and pretty small compared to the older students, but it would be a tight fit and one of them would be left out.

They found out exactly what the spell did after running across an empty compartment. With a flick of his wrist, Harry summoned his wand to his hand and waved it in precise strokes. He muttered a spell under his breath, too soft for them to hear over the noise of the other students chattering and laughing.

What happened next shocked the group. The small compartment began to expand. The floor, ceiling and walls grew wider and higher. The window at the other end of the compartment, the two benches attached lower to the floor, and the alcove for trunks overhead all began to stretch like a rubber band as it was pulled to match the new proportions of the room. By the time the compartment finished expanding, it looked large

enough to fit ten people.

"Wow," Hannah muttered in awe, her eyes wide.

"What kind of spell was that?" asked a curious Terry. The others perked up at his question and looked at Harry. Blaise, Daphne and Hermione seemed especially interested in his answer.

"The Expansion Charm, or *Dilato*, is a Charm that causes an enclosed space to expand in proportion to the amount of magic pumped into the charm," Harry explained, absently using his wand to conjure a small rag so he could wipe the sweat off his brow. That spell was more difficult than he thought. Even after using the wand movements and incantation it took more effort than any other spells he'd cast thus far. Then again, he had only tried the spell on a small shoes box before now.

"That's such a cool spell." As was the case in most instances, Tracey seemed to be the only one capable of speech after seeing Harry's admittedly impressive display of magic.

"How come I've never heard of that spell before?" asked the ever curious and inquisitive Hermione.

"Because it's not in any of your Hogwarts spell books," Harry informed her, "I found it in a book called *Charms for the Seriously Charmed*." He shrugged. "It was one of the books I bought during my last visit to Diagon Alley over the summer. And now that the questions are out of the way, perhaps we could sit down before people start complaining about us obstructing the hall."

The words snapped everyone out of their stupor, and the group walked into the newly expanded compartment. Daphne sat next to the window and Harry, who correctly assumed she wanted to be isolated from everyone else due to not being comfortable with them, sat next to her.

Tracey sat on the other side of the compartment, opposite Daphne, leaning against the wall while Neville sat next to her. The Slytherin offered the boy her usual bright smile, getting a somewhat less sure one from Neville. The boy may be gaining confidence, but he still wasn't quite used to breaking longstanding Gryffindor tradition by being so friendly

with a Slytherin.

Blaise ended up sitting beside Neville, and in turn, sat with Hermione on his other side, who was closest to the door. The bushy-haired brunette gave the dark-skinned Slytherin an uncertain look. Blaise looked down at her and offered a small nod of acknowledgment, which seemed to put her a little more at ease. At least enough to give him a smile.

On Harry's side, Lisa placed herself next to him. The girl was still casting curious glances around the enlarged compartment. Meanwhile, Hannah, Susan and Terry sat to her left, with Hannah sitting next to Lisa, Susan next to Hannah, and Terry near the compartment door. Harry thought they all made a rather interesting sight, and a number of wide-eyed students who peeked into the room while passing by apparently agreed.

Not long after sitting down the group made conversation. The compartment became filled with chatter as they broke off into individual discussions. Tracey spoke to Neville about Quidditch, said boy nodding his head and agreeing with everything she said because he knew very little about the sport. Hannah and Susan spoke quietly amongst themselves, though Terry interjected occasionally. It took a while for them to start speaking, but eventually Hermione and Blaise struck up a small debate about whether the spells in Defense Against the Dark Arts could be classified as Charms or not.

"I'm really impressed that you can actually do this spell," Lisa said to Harry as she finished her examination of the room and started up her own conversation with the raven-haired boy. "A lot of stores and shops in Diagon Alley have an expansion charm on them, so I always figured it was a complicated piece of magic that most people don't learn until after they graduate."

"It's not actually that complicated," Harry informed her, "the spell itself is actually simple as far as the mechanics go. The hard part is putting enough magic into the spell to actually make it work, and then there's the fact that the larger the space you're trying to expand is, the harder using the spell becomes. When I first learned the spell I tried it on a shoe box, and it was much easier than what I did here."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daphne listening to his conversation intently. He wondered if she was interested in magic theory or just curious.

"In any case, I'm not entirely sure the magic used in the shops are the same as what I used here. The Expansion Charm is a temporary spell. Depending on how much magic is put into the spell and the size the enclosed space has been expanded to will determine how long the spell lasts. I only put enough magic for it to stay last until we reach platform nine and three-quarters, maybe a little longer."

"The magics used in the shops, on the other hand, are permanent, from what I can see. I mean, it would be a pain if someone had to keep applying the charm every single hour, and that says nothing about how difficult it would be to rearrange the items their selling every time they need to reapply the charm when they open shop."

He smiled as Lisa giggled, no doubt imagining frustrated store owners having to move all their wares because the magic used to expand their shops wore out. Daphne, he noticed, had also quirked her lips at the undoubtedly humorous scenario.

"I suspect the rooms might actually be enchanted to remain that size, though I know next to nothing about enchantments other than that it being a combination of Charms and Runes used to cast a spell on an item permanently."

"You know more than I do," Lisa said, "I don't know what enchanting is. At least, I didn't until now."

"Glad to be of service."

Individual conversations eventually ceased when Tracey brought out some cards and they played a game of Exploding Snap. It was a very... interesting game. The rules were simple enough. When someone sees two cards with identical picture, they tap their wand on the card and gain a point. The one with the most points wins. It was similar go fish, sort of, only you're not given a hand, you don't ask others if they have a certain card, and if you're not fast enough with your wand, the cards explode in your face.

Both Hermione and Neville almost had their eyebrows burnt off when they were too slow to act.

The only one who did not play with them was, naturally, Daphne. Harry peered at the girl out of his peripheral with a bit of worry. While she seemed to be mostly fine, she appeared to still be very tired. Occasionally, she would nod off, only to discreetly pinch herself to keep awake.

Summoning his wand, Harry discreetly waved it over himself and Daphne. The sound of the others talking soon became soft, muffled, as if coming from a great distance. The blond girl blinked several times, then lifted a single, elegant eyebrow at him.

"It's a spell I modified," Harry answered her silent question. "A combination of the inverted Silencing Charm and a basic Muffling Charm."

"What do you mean inverted?" asked Daphne in a soft whisper.

"I mean we can hear them but they can't hear us." Harry discreetly waved at the others as they continued chattering. "What I essentially did was create a 'bubble' with my magic over us. The 'inside' of the bubble contains the silencing spell, so anything we say cannot be overheard by the others."

"And the 'outside' would contain the Muffling Charm, right?" Daphne received a nod from her guess and raised the other eyebrow. "I'm impressed. I don't know how much about Charms beyond the few used in Defense Against the Dark Arts, but modifying a spell like that can't be easy."

"Easier than you may think," Harry said, "charms like this are always simple to modify, though I will admit this took more effort than I originally assumed it would."

"And how do you know so many spells?" inquired Daphne.

"Before I started Hogwarts, I skimmed through a lot of the books I bought and made a list of all the spells I thought would prove useful to learn."

What he didn't say was that each of the spells he chose to learn would prove beneficial toward his goals. He also didn't mention that the spell he just cast was something he had thought up on the spot. "And when school started I would choose a spell to learn and practice it until I had it down."

"That's not a half bad idea, actually," Daphne said, "For a Gryffindor."

Harry rolled his eyes, but didn't respond to her jibe.

"So, as interesting as this is, I suspect you have another reason for casting this spell other than to show off to me."

Harry nodded, then glanced around the compartment. No one had noticed they weren't paying attention to what was going on around them. Good.

"I wanted to ask if you were ok," Harry admitted. Daphne frowned at him, making him hasten to clarify. "What I mean is you look tired. A few good nights of sleep can't fix a month or so of hardly sleeping at all."

There was no physical change in Daphne's expression. Her face still remained carefully neutral, save for the raised eyebrows. However, while her face remained unchanged, her eyes were another matter. The slightly cool chips of icy blue seemed to melt a bit. The change in her eyes made her entire countenance seem different than before, warmer somehow, though Harry did not fully understand how a pair of eyes could be so expressive.

"I am fine," Daphne replied softly, "just a little tired."

"If you'd like, I could put up a silencing spell around you so you can get some sleep," Harry offered.

Daphne tilted her head for a second, studying him. After a moment, her lips turned upwards ever so slightly. Most people wouldn't notice. Harry was not most people.

"I would like that."

Harry nodded, his wand back in hand. He canceled the modified charm, returning the compartment to its normal volume. Everyone was still talking. Pointing his wand at Daphne and muttering under his breath, he cast a Silencing Charm. The only indication it worked was the blond's nod.

Deciding to go just one step further, Harry pointed his wand at the wall and the back of the bench where Daphne sat. The girl blinked as the area around her became soft like a marshmallow, or a pillow.

She looked over at Harry who merely shrugged. Giving him an almost unnoticeable smile of gratitude, Daphne leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

It was almost fascinating to watch the girl fall asleep. Her lips parted slightly and her breathing evened out. Her face became relaxed, tranquil, the neutral expression gone. She looked like a completely different person when sleeping. When awake, her appearance was guarded and cold; asleep, she looked peaceful, content almost. It made Harry wonder how different he looked when sleeping.

Feeling a set of eyes on him, Harry turned his head and saw Tracey staring at him. She was smiling, and when their eyes met she mouthed 'thank you' right before one of the cards she was shuffling exploded in her face.

Tracey blinked in surprise as everyone laughed at her. A number of black spots marred her face from the explosion, soot stains that gave her the appearance of a mad scientist whose experiment just exploded in her face. Tracey tried to scowl at everyone, but was unsuccessful because she seemed incapable of doing anything other than smiling sheepishly. Sighing, Harry waved his wand at her and the soot stains disappeared.

"Thanks!"

"You're welcome."

Just then the compartment door opened and in walked Malfoy alongside his two Gorilla bodyguards. As the compartment went silent, the heir to the Malfoy family looked at everyone present. Then his eyes focused on

Blaise, Daphne and Tracey, a sneer slowly forming on his face.

"So..." he looked at Harry, eyes narrowing to match his sneer. "You've decided to ally yourself with lesser families, I see. I should have known this would happen. The Potter's have always been too stupid for their own good."

Harry frowned. He had suspected this would happen for a while now, as Draco struck him as the type who would see his befriending other people in his house but not him as an insult, but had not realized it would be so soon.

"Bugger off, Malfoy!" Came the twin shouts of Hannah and Tracey, the two who seemed to dislike Malfoy most.

Malfoy's sneer grew. It was almost Snape worthy, if it were not coming from an 11 year-old boy.

"How dare you speak to me that way, dirty half-bloods!"

The glares intensified. Not just Tracey's and Hannah's, but everyone's.

"I would watch what you say, Draco," Blaise said coolly. "Do not forget that while your father may have the ears of the Minister, the Zabini family is far richer than you will ever be."

Malfoy's ears turned pink.

"Only because your mother whored herself out like a common peasant and then killed her husbands!"

Blaise scowled and sent the boy a fierce stare, his eyes possessing an unearthly fire that hid a quiet rage. It was the first time Harry had seen him angry. He had to admit, it was impressive.

"I dare you to say that again," the dark-skinned boy hissed through clenched teeth. Insulting his mother seemed to be the one way to get Blaise angry.

"Oh, did you not hear me the first time." Malfoy seemed rather pleased to

have elicited such a reaction in the taller boy. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You Zabini's always did have a problem with—"

"Is there a reason you're here, Malfoy?" asked Harry, heading off any argument before it could get ugly.

"It has nothing to do with you, Potter," Malfoy said snottily. "I just came to warn these three about fraternizing with our enemies." He gestured the the three Slytherin's sitting in the compartment. "You'd better think twice about where your loyalties lie. Those of us in Slytherin will not tolerate betrayal lightly."

"You're concern has been duly noted," Tracey said with a surprisingly cold glare for someone who usually acted so bright and cheerful. "Now leave."

Malfoy scowled at the girl. He looked like he might say something else, but a quick look around at all the others glaring at him seemed to change his mind. Giving them one last sneer, he left, his hulking brutes for bodyguards cracking their knuckles in what Harry assumed was them trying to be menacing, before following the boy out.

"Grr!" Tracey growled as she glared at the now closed door. "I can't believe that stupid, arrogant, sodding jerk actually had the nerve to come in here and say all that!"

"What do you expect?" Blaise said, "Malfoy's a spoiled brat whose always used to getting his way."

"He's not going to be a problem for you, is he?" Harry asked, a little worried. This had always been one of the greatest flaws in his plan. Slytherin house contained a lot of Death Eater children, and Draco Malfoy was the most influential thanks to his father. If he used his father's power wisely enough, he could cause problems for Blaise, Daphne and Tracey.

"Not really." Blaise shrugged. "Malfoy may think he's all powerful because his daddy's rich and a lot of people in the Ministry owe him favors, but the truth is he only really controls the Death Eater children, and they're actually a minority since a lot of Death Eater's never had children."

"Besides, after you bought brooms for all four houses, very few students in our house actually dislike you," Blaise added, almost as an afterthought. "Mos are confused about you, but a good deal of them respect you. Malfoy won't be finding any support from them."

"Still..."

"I wouldn't worry too much," Tracey butt in before Harry could say anything. "If Draco is actually stupid enough to try anything, Daphne's got a list of imaginative and painful curses she can use to keep him in line."

"Oh..."

Harry looked at Daphne, who slept peacefully under the Silencing Charm. He wondered what curses she knew, who had taught them to her, and if she'd be willing to teach them to him.

"So." Tracey started shuffling the cards in her hand again, grinning widely. "Who's up for another game of Exploding Snap?"

Hermione and Neville both groaned and shook their heads negatively, causing the others in the compartment to laugh.

XoX

By the time the Hogwarts Express reached platform nine and three-quarters, several of those in the group decided to follow Daphne's example and fell asleep during the transition from Scotland countryside to London cityscape.

Hannah, having talked and laughed for nearly two hours eventually ended up falling asleep on her best friend's shoulder, her energy spent. Surprisingly, Susan, wasn't asleep, but did not seem to mind the blond pig-tailed girl using her as a pillow. Harry figured she must be used to the her friend's antics.

On Susan's right, Terry had also decided to get some shut eye. He leaned against the wall, his mouth hanging part way open, snoring. Thankfully, it wasn't very loud, so no one was actually bothered by the sound.

On the other side of the compartment, Tracey Davis slept like a log, or a rock. Much like her friend Daphne she, too, was leaning against the wall. Also much like her friend, she appeared so much more peaceful when sleeping. Or at least, that was Harry's perception of her. It may have had something to do with the fact that she wasn't talking anymore. The girl was very boisterous when awake.

The others had managed to stay awake for the whole train ride. Lisa had pulled out a book on the history of an ancient group of witches and wizards that used to live in Samaria. Much like the raven-haired girl, Hermione also decided to do some reading. The large tome she perused through let him know her choice in reading material was *Hogwarts, A History*. Next to her, Blaise and Neville were having a quiet conversation with each other, something about plants and potions.

For his part, Harry took to reading *Self-Defense Spellwork*, a book containing a list of spells used in self-defense, both of the offensive and defensive variety. Most of the spells listed were moderately difficult, such as the *Protego*, a shield charm that created a magical barrier that could block both physical entities and spells.

Personally, Harry didn't see himself using the *Protego* very much. It just didn't fit his style. But it would probably be good to learn nonetheless, if for no other reason than he may end up needing to protect someone else with it in the future.

Harry felt the train finally slow to a stop. Turning a little to look at Daphne, he canceled the Silencing Charm around her, and began carefully shaking her awake.

"Daphne. Daphne. We're here."

The blond pureblood stirred. An almost inaudible groan escaped her lips as startling blue eyes blinked open. She looked around the compartment, her icy irises appearing just a tad groggy, before they settled on him.

"Are we there already?"

Harry's lips twitched into a small, amused smile.

"Already? Daphne, you've been asleep for five hours."

"Oh can it, Potter."

Directly opposite Daphne, the now awake Tracey Davis tiredly snickered at her friend, which ended with her receiving a small glare from the now fully awake blond.

"You too, Tracey."

"Is it just me," started Hannah as she stretched her hands above her head and yawned loudly, "or do these short naps just make you more tired than you were before falling asleep."

"I think it may just be you," Tracey teased with a smile, though she seemed even groggier than the other two. "And Daphne." Her friend rolled her eyes. "Personally, I feel great."

"Liar," Daphne said. She seemed more alert now that she'd had time to regain her bearings. "Tracey's always had a problem getting up. I often have to shove her off her bed just to make her wake up. If it weren't for me, she would probably sleep until noon."

"That's not true," Tracey complained.

"Isn't it?" asked Daphne, the dry tone in her voice making it evident that the question was rhetorical. "Name one time you've gotten up before ten that didn't involve either myself or your parents waking you."

Tracey opened her mouth to speak, then promptly shut it. Her face scrunched up as she tried to think of something to say, but slowly began to turn red when she realized that Daphne was right.

"And now you have just proven my point."

Tracey flushed.

"Shut up, Daphne."

Harry found the interaction between Daphne and Tracey absolutely

fascinating. It was so different than what he was used to seeing when dealing with the oftentimes cold pureblood girl. Were it not for the evidence in front of his eyes, he would have never believed she was the person speaking. A part of him had to wonder if this was how they always acted when not around others. He hoped so, because it meant Daphne was comfortable enough with them to be herself, even if she still downplayed her emotions.

The group soon left the compartment, which shrunk back to its original size as they left, and exited the Hogwarts Express.

Much like when Harry had first arrived at platform nine and three-quarters at the start of the term, the place was a bustling zoo of people. Children were being hugged by their parents, siblings too young to go to Hogwarts greeted their brothers and/or sisters enthusiastically, and the students in question were telling their families of their time at Hogwarts. It was all very lively.

Hermione turned to them, her face uncertain as she bit her lip.

"I should probably get going. My parents are on the other side of the barrier."

"Alright," Harry and the others—minus a few like Blaise and Daphne who merely nodded—offered the girl a smile, putting whatever worries she had at ease and causing her to smile back. "Have fun on your family trip."

"I will."

The others said their goodbyes to the girl as well. Hermione offered them one final wave before making her way toward the barrier. A few seconds later she disappeared within the crowd of bodies.

"I should probably get going as well," Daphne started, "My father is... probably looking for me within this crowd." There was a small pause in her voice, Harry noticed, as if she had been about to say one thing and quickly changed it to something else. He wondered what she had been going to say originally, but felt he already had a good idea.

"Bye, Daphne!"

Tracey gave her best friend a big hug, which was returned much more hesitantly and with far less force. The blond then turned to Harry, biting her lip. After a single moments hesitation she held out her hand towards him.

It only took Harry a moment to realize what she was doing. But when he did, he recovered from his surprise admirably. He took her hand in one of his and brought it to his lips.

"I'll see you after the holidays," she said softly.

"Of course." He smiled at her, causing another hesitant one to be given in return. She took a step back after another moment, nodded at the others, then turned on her heel and left.

"Wow," Tracey said after a moment. She turned to look at Harry, her eyes appraising. "I don't know what you did, but whatever it was, it must have really gotten through to her."

Harry tilted his head to the side in a curiously endearing gesture.

"You mean she didn't tell you?"

"No," Tracey pouted, cheeks puffing up like a squirrel with acorns stuffed into its mouth. "I've been asking her since she apologized to me, but she refuses to say a thing. So..." he suddenly looked at him with a sly smile. "Perhaps you can tell me what happened between the two of you."

"Sorry." Harry shrugged. "But it's not my secret to tell."

Tracey crossed her arms, huffing at being rebuffed.

"There she is, mum! Look at who she's with!"

"Oh no," Lisa moaned as she buried her face into her hands and gave a long suffering sigh.

"Your sister," Harry guessed.

"Yes."

Lisa turned with the others, a cheesy and obviously forced smile on her face. Harry peered at where she was looking to see three people, two women and one man. The youngest of the three, Lisa's sister, Harry guessed, looked a lot like Lisa, except instead of raven-colored hair she had light brown hair with honey-colored streaks running through it. The woman next to her was what he suspected his Ravenclaw friend would look like in the next few years: a beautiful woman with lustrous black hair and a warm smile. Standing beside the older woman was a man of fairly average height and build, with swept back light brown hair tinged gray, a small goatee, and gray eyes.

"Mum," Lisa greeted, or tried to greet. She was interrupted by her sister.

"See! See!" The older sibling was saying as she pointed at Harry. "It's Harry Potter! She's friends with Harry Potter!"

Harry actually felt his eye twitching in minor annoyance. It was one thing to stare at him like he was the second coming of Merlin; he could ignore that. It was quite another to be so blatant and loud when pointing him out so everyone in the vicinity could hear it. This girl clearly didn't know the meaning of discretion.

"Wow, Lisa," Tracey said, not even bothering to whisper. "You were right, she really is annoying."

Lisa's older sister glared at the brunette.

"And who are you?"

"A friend of mine," Harry said before Tracey could say something that would likely end with and the older girl arguing. "Just like Lisa is."

He then purposefully ignored Lisa's sister and turned his attention to the parents. The first thing he noticed was they were looking at his scar. He expected that. It seemed to be the standard reaction most people had when first meeting him. Even Daphne's eyes had gone to his scar when they first met.

"It's a pleasure to meet you two. As your eldest daughter said, I'm Harry Potter."

"Ah, nice to meet you!" Mr. Turpin enthusiastically shook Harry's offered hand. "The name's Micheal Turpin, and it's truly an honor to meet you at last, Mr. Potter!"

That was a standard reaction as well. At least it was only one person this time and he wasn't being mobbed by a horde of overly-enthusiastic fans.

"Oh, let go of the boy, Mike," Ms. Turpin chided, "you look like you're about to rip his arm off with your enthusiasm."

"Ah, ahem, yes, of course. Sorry."

The now thoroughly abashed man let go of Harry's hand, allowing him to greet Lisa's mom in the standard customs dictated by pureblood etiquette. Ms. Turpin smiled beatifically as Harry kissed her knuckles. By her side, Lisa's sister, whose name he had not yet learned and didn't particularly care to learn, growled at her mom.

"As I have already introduced myself, may I know the name of the young lady?"

"Julie."

"A pleasure to meet you. It's clear to me who Lisa get's her beauty from."

Pay the lady of the house a compliment. That was one of the first lessons Andromeda taught him. It was very important because you were not only complimenting the female on their looks, but the husband on their taste in women. Harry didn't really get why it was a compliment to the men, but he definitely understood the benefit of endearing himself to the female of any marriage. After all, if Mrs. Crawft's relationship with her husband was any indication, it was more often than not the woman who was truly in charge of the house.

Julie Turpin smiled at the compliment while Lisa's face, for perhaps the first time since they had met, took on the same shade as Susan's hair. Beside the girl, Tracey snickered into her hand as the others showed varying degrees of amusement.

Lisa soon left with her family, her older sister complaining to the younger

girl very loudly about how it wasn't fair that she was friends with a magical celebrity. Harry hoped to never see that girl again, but knew it to be a false hope—unless he wanted to stop being friends with Lisa, which he didn't.

Terry left next. The group was introduced to the boy's parents who, much like Lisa's father, had been ecstatic to meet the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry allowed the man his enthusiasm and greeted him and his wife cordially. They left a short while later, leaving only Blaise, Hannah, Neville, Susan and Tracey left.

The crowd began to thin as more people left. That made it much easier to see several people converging on their location.

"Mum! Dad!"

Tracey's shout directed Harry to the first group he observed. A pretty young woman who could only be Tracey's mother bent down to give her daughter a fierce hug. She, like her daughter, had brown hair, brown eyes, and a slightly mischievous smile warmed by motherly affection. The man Harry could only assume was her father had black hair, dark eyes and an easy going smile as he watched his wife's reunion with her daughter.

"Ooh, I've missed you so much, Trace!" the woman exclaimed. Tracey looked mildly embarrassed by her mother's open display of affection. Her face had taken on the same hue as a tomato.

"M-mum!"

While Tracey was being smothered with motherly affection, two other meetings took place.

"Susan," greeted a somewhat stern voice that did little to hide the warmth behind it. Harry turned to see a square-jawed witch with close cropped gray hair and a monocle. This, he concluded, must be Amelia Bones, the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She reminded him of Professor McGonagall, in a way. The way she held herself, appearing stern, but fair, and not afraid to get her hands dirty should the situation require it, reminded him greatly of his Head of House.

"Aunty!" Susan moved toward her aunt and embraced the much older witch. The expression on Madam Bones' face softened and a smile etched itself onto her stern features as she hugged her niece.

"Gran," Neville greeted his grandmother. Augusta Longbottom was a very formidable-looking witch despite her obviously old age. She was tall, thin and bony, but held herself with the kind of strength that many others would feel envious of. Harry noticed immediately the red hand bag held in her left hand, and the stuffed vulture hat she wore.

"Neville," she greeted, "it is good to see you are well. I trust you've been having a good time at school and studying hard?"

"Neville is in the top ten of the school rankings for first years," Harry told her, causing the woman to look his way. He flashed her a smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Dowager Longbottom, my name is Harry Potter."

"Mr. Potter." The Dowager Longbottom looked Harry up and down before nodding approvingly. "Neville has told me quite a bit about you in his letters, and I must say, if even half of it is true than I am impressed. You're father and grandfather, Charles, would be quite proud of you."

Harry inclined his head politely.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Susan's said quite a bit about you as well," Amelia said as she and Susan finished hugging. The girl in question started to flush as she looked from Harry to her aunt, then at the ground, seeming more interested in counting the cracks on the platform. "In fact, every letter I've gotten from her has been about you."

"And my daughter can't shut up about you," Mr. Davis said, stepping into the conversation as well.

"Dad!" Tracey complained in what sounded like embarrassment or humiliation. Maybe even a mixture of both.

"What? It's true," her father said, "every letter I've received from you is always 'Harry this' or 'Harry did that' or 'Harry is so cool.' I don't even

think you've mentioned anything else in your letters."

Tracey sent her father a glare worthy of her Head of House. Unfortunately, because she was so young, it didn't have the affect she was probably hoping for, and her father easily ignored it. Fortunately for her, her mother had no compunctions when it came to giving her husband a playful swat to the back of the head and telling him to behave, which earned her a sheepish look.

Perhaps his earlier thoughts on woman wearing the figurative 'pants' in the relationship held some truth to them, after all.

Greetings were soon exchanged as Harry introduced himself and his friends to everyone else's friends respective parents and/or guardians. The only two who did not need to be introduced were Madam Bones and the Dowager Longbottom, who ran in the same social circles.

"Oh my, what an eclectic group we have here," a voice spoke from Harry's left

Everyone turned around to see a woman walking up to them, a darkly mysterious yet elegant beauty with light olive-colored skin, dark raven hair hair that shone lustrously in the light and traveled down her back in gentle waves, and light blue eyes set on a regal face with dark red, cupid bow lips. Both her smile and her eyes shone with an air of amusement as she stopped in front of them.

"Mother," Blaise greeted. Harry nearly choked on his own spit. This was Blaise's mother?!

The woman walked over to her son and gave him a gentle hug.

"Blaise, I see you have been making friends," she said, dark, playful eyes roving over the many faces before landing on Harry. Her eyes went to his forehead, where she saw his scar on prominent display.

"Harry Potter." Her lips curved into an even wider smile. Harry felt himself skip a beat. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, ma'am." Harry quickly remembered his manners and suavely

took the hand offered, letting his lips graze against her knuckles.

"Such a gentlemen too," Ms. Zabini cooed, "You know, I would love to introduce you to my daughter."

For some reason he could not discern, Harry felt like he had suddenly been dropped into a pool with a shark.

XoX

It was a slightly mentally exhausted Harry that walked through the front yard of the Crawft's residence. Dealing with Ms. Zabini had been difficult. Dealing with Ms. Zabini, Madam Bones and the Dowager Longbottom—who seemed to bear some hostility toward Blaise's mother—made him want to crawl into his bed and hide. Nothing, not his reading, nor his experiences with life, could have prepared him for that precarious predicament.

Sighing, exhaustion seeping into his bones, Harry stopped in front of the white-painted door, knocked twice, then waited.

It wasn't very long before the sound of footsteps reached him. The door opened, and Harry found Mrs. Crawft standing before him. The woman looked at him for a second, blinking, before a smile spread across her face.

"Harry!"

With surprising suddenness, Ms. Crawft knelt down and embraced the young boy in a motherly hug. Harry surprised himself by returning the hug without reservation. He was even more surprised to discover just how much he had missed her hugs.

"You should have told me you would be arriving today," the woman exclaimed, holding the hug a few moments longer before releasing him. She did not let him go, however, and instead placed her hands on his shoulder and held him at arms length to give him a stern look that was broken by how happy she was to see him. "I would have come and picked you up."

"I wanted to surprise Lisa," Harry admitted before yawning. Ms. Crawft gave him a slightly worried look.

"Are you alright, dear?"

"Just a bit tired, Ms. Crawft. The ride over was long."

"Oh, well, Scotland is quite a ways from here." The woman's expression changed and she smiled at him again. Harry soon discovered that he had missed her smiles, too. "And I believe Lisa will most definitely be surprised to see you. She has been awfully depressed ever since you left. It will be nice to see her happy again."

The news that Lisa was depressed caused Harry's face to adopt a worried look.

"Is she alright?"

"She's fine," Mrs. Crawft said dismissively. She cast him a mischievous smile and a wink. "She's just been sulking a bit since you left. Now..." She stood back up. "Lisa's in her room. I suggest you go see her."

"Of course." Harry really was in a hurry to see his friend. He paused, however, and turned to look at the woman who had treated him as her own for the past five years. He smiled. "It's good to see you again... Anastasia."

He left the surprised woman with a smile on his face. Walking down the hall he could hear the television on in the living room. It was on the news channel, which meant Lisa's father was probably watching it. Mrs. Crawft had no interest in watching the news, except to find out what the weather would be like.

Stopping in front of the door he knew to be Lisa's, Harry wondered how he should approach this. Should he knock? Or should he just walk in? He wanted to surprise her, but it was incredibly rude not to knock.

Sighing, Harry knocked on the door and waited.

"Coming!"

There was a thump, followed by the scraping of a chair. Lisa had been sitting at her desk then. The sound of padded footsteps soon followed, getting ever closer before they stopped. The door opened.

"Is dinner ready...?" Lisa Crawft trailed off and her eyes widened as she stared into familiar emerald green orbs. "Harry?" She breathed, too shocked by his presence to move.

That was ok, though, as Harry moved for her.

Stepping forward, he closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around the girl in a fierce embrace.

"I missed you."

Three words that seemed so small, but meant so much. They had been together for a little over five years now, and had never strayed far from each other until he left for Hogwarts. He had never truly realized just how big a role Lisa had played in his life until she'd all but disappeared from it, albeit, temporarily.

Suddenly, everything seemed right again. He forgot about how tired he felt; thoughts of school fled like the last snow of winter melting in the spring sun; all that mattered was the girl in his arms. His dearest friend, his sister in all but blood.

Lisa returned his hug. Her arms wound themselves tightly around his waist, and her face pressed into his shoulder. Harry was not surprised to feel the wetness of tears beginning to stain his shirt.

"I missed you, too."

They would remain that way for nearly half an hour, until Mr. Crawft found them and nearly threw a fit at seeing his daughter being hugged by the boy he had hoped not to see for another several months.

Christmas is finally here. I suspect the holidays will be take around two chapters to complete.

I hope you all enjoyed reading the chapter, and I would like to thank everyone who reviewed my previous chapter. I'm pleased to know you guys approve of what I did with Daphne.

And remember, if you have any questions, comments, concerns, or if your house has suddenly been invaded by kung fu using monkeys, please leave it in a review.

Holiday Shopping

Holiday Shopping

Harry Potter sighed as he sat in the middle row of the movie theater with Lisa and her mom, his best friend sitting to his right. She had pushed the arm rest up so she could lean against him without obstruction and rested her head against his shoulders. It was such a common occurrence he hardly noticed her closeness.

On Lisa's left, Ms. Crawft watched the pair instead of the movie being played, a twinkle in her eye that, had Harry seen it, probably would have caused him to shiver in undisguised and unknown fear. Women, mother's particularly, and mother's of your best female friend especially, were scary like that.

The movie that played on the big screen was called Beauty and the Beast, a Disney cartoon about a Prince who was cursed and turned into a beast, and the only way for the curse to be broken was to find someone who could love him even if he was a beast before the last petal on some magical rose fell. It was an epic romance about a young woman named Belle who traded her place for her father when he was captured by the , and ended up falling in love with said Beast, thereby breaking the curse.

At least, Lisa called it an epic romance. Harry thought it was awful. He had never really liked these romance tales his friend loved so much, and really couldn't understand her need to watch them. Aside from how these stories were completely unrealistic even by his standards—which really said something considering he was a wizard who went to school for witchcraft and wizardry—the romance itself also had no basis in reality.

Granted, Harry never really thought about romance. He just didn't see the point in falling in love with someone when he still had so much to do. Why would he want to waste time on something as silly as love when he was only now beginning to move forward with his ambitions and goals? He had told Lisa as much when she tried convincing him they should see this movie.

Lisa had called him insensitive.

Of course, that did not stop them from seeing the movie. Everyone knew Harry would capitulate sooner rather than later. It was the unfortunate aspect of having Lisa as a friend. All she had to do was look at him with those large, teary, doe-like eyes and he folded like McLaggen after Harry beat the stuffing out of him.

The older boy hadn't been able to look at him without paling and running the other way since.

Another sigh was just barely contained as he thought about how depressing that was. Here he was, a cunning, intelligent, formidable and ambitious young man, and he was caving into his friend's demands whenever she wanted just because she gave him a look. What a truly debilitating thought.

Thankfully, as with all things both good and horrible, the movie came to an end, and Harry, Lisa and Ms. Crawft vacated the theater with everyone else.

Lisa, of course, started gushing about how sensational the movie was the moment they left. Harry felt like groaning.

"I can't believe how amazing that was! Belle was so amazing, and beautiful, and kind! And the Beast was incredible. Kind of a jerk, but he really proved himself to be a good guy, especially when he protected Belle from those wolves and got injured for her!"

Times like these made Harry wish he could block out the sound of other people talking. He really had no desire to listen to Lisa gush on about how amazing a movie they had *just* seen was. He saw the movie as well. Not only had he seen the movie, but unlike his friend, who would probably forget everything that happened in the movie within a year, Harry would have this movie in his memories for the rest of his life.

Why oh why had he not convinced them they should watch Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves instead? That story, at least, had a basis in reality, even if the non-magicals didn't know it. Robin Hood, after all, had been a wizard in the early 15th Century.

"I didn't like Gaston, though." Lisa sniffed disdainfully as she continued her tirade. "He was an idiot."

"I don't know." Harry finally butt in with a thoughtful look on his face. "I kind of liked Gaston."

"What!?" Lisa whirled on him as her mother giggled behind the pair. "How could you possibly like that self-centered, egotistical, vile, loathsome git!"

Wow, she'd picked up some impressive vocabulary. Harry wondered where she got those insults, but then realized it probably came from him when he was watching football or professional martial arts competitions. Sometimes, even Harry couldn't help but be a child.

A very articulate child with an incredibly literate mind and a vocabulary large enough to make an Oxford English professor green with envy, but still a child.

Harry looked at his friend, and with the straightest face possible, said, "because every last inch of him's covered with hair."

Lisa stared at him for several moments, blinking as if trying comprehend his words. Behind her, Ms. Crawft covered her mouth in order to stifle her giggling.

"Are you having it on with me?" she asked finally, her mind having recovered enough to speak, as well as glare at him.

"No."

Lisa's face began to twitch as Harry's face suddenly went from being completely blank to giving her the most dazzling smile she had ever seen. It was so incredibly bright that it could only be fake, especially when one took the time to remember that Harry never smiled like that. Ever.

"Jerk," she muttered, looking away from him, eyes closing as she turned her nose up in a haughty gesture.

Harry gave a very mild chuckle, almost inaudible over the shouts and

laughs and squeals from the people around them. He placed a hand on his friend's arm, making her attention turn back to him, and gave her a sincere smile.

"I'm glad you enjoyed the movie."

"W-well of course I did," Lisa's face became flushed deep red. She looked away once again, but this time did so in order to hide just how bright her face had become. "It was an awesome movie."

Harry smiled a bit, enough that Lisa, who had been sneaking the occasional peak at him while trying to mask her blush, noticed.

"Hey, Harry?"

"Yes."

"Are you alright?"

Harry blinked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you seem... different." Lisa frowned, eyes scrutinizing him, as if looking at him for the first time in years. "It's not a bad change or anything. In fact, it's really good, at least, I think it is."

"Ok..." Harry said slowly, his face adopting a confused look. "What's really good? And how am I different?"

"You seem happy!" Lisa blurted, before blushing again. "I mean, happier than usual. I mean, you're usually not unhappy or anything, but I've only ever seen you smile like that a few times before now, and usually that's only when you're reading a book, or getting beaten up by that old man you call a teacher. But ever since you've returned, you've been smiling a lot more."

The words caused a small moment of introspection with Harry, who furrowed his brow. Was he really so different that Lisa actually picked up on it? The girl wasn't as oblivious as she sometimes seemed, especially

when it came to him. One might even argue that, out of all the people who knew him, she knew him best and could pick up his moods much more readily. But even she wouldn't know what he was feeling if he truly did not want her to.

And what was that she said about him being happier? Was he really happier now than he had been before he left for Hogwarts? Discounting their tearful goodbye, because that had just been a disheartening moment for both of them.

He would admit that he smiled more frequently. Sometimes he even caught himself smiling when there was no reason to smile. In his mind, there were only a few reasons to show a smile: success at accomplishing a goal that you have been working toward for a long time, getting one up over his teacher when they sparred (which happened so rarely he couldn't help but feel insanely happy about when it did happen), reading a good book, and the special moments he shared with Lisa. He supposed he could now add the times he spent with his friends from Hogwarts to the list. They made him smile more.

Could that be it? Was he happy because of his friends? Well, they weren't with him right now, but he would admit that thinking about them brought a smile to his face. Maybe it was a combination of many emotions. Something to think about later on.

"Harry? Harry. Lisa to Harry."

"Yes?" Harry blinked as he looked over at Lisa, "Is something wrong?"

"You've been spacing out for nearly an hour now," Lisa exaggerated. His internal clock told him only a single minute had passed. Though, to her, it probably felt like an hour. His friend had never been one for patience.

"Sorry," Harry apologized, "I was just thinking."

Lisa's face turned curious.

"About?"

"About why I'm so happy, of course."

"Oh," Lisa paused, "and why are you so happy?"

Another smile came to Harry's face as he walked closer to Lisa and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. The girl flushed at the intimate contact. She looked incredibly flustered, and Harry could almost imagine steam pouring out of her ears.

He frowned for a moment. While Lisa sometimes acted shy around him when embarrassed, he had never seen her blush from physical contact with him. Heck, just a few minutes ago she had been practically using him as a teddy bear.

A few seconds later he shrugged. She was probably just not used to him being the one to initiate the contact. Usually, as was the case in the theater, it was always her who made first contact.

"I'm happy because I'm spending time with my best friend, naturally." Harry smiled. "What other possible reason do you possibly think could make me so happy?"

"N-no reason."

Harry frowned again as Lisa stuttered. Ms. Crawft began giggling at the pair again, before clapping her hands to get the two's attention.

"So, I believe you said you still needed to go Christmas shopping, yes Harry?"

"Yes, that's right," Harry said. It may have been the first day since he got back from Hogwarts, but he wanted to get his Christmas shopping out of the way as soon as possible.

That, and he wasn't really sure what to get some of his new friends. A few of them, he knew, would be easy to shop for, even if he would need to take a trip to Diagon Alley, but others he simply had no clue what to buy? Should he get something practical? Something expensive? And if he did get something expensive, would that make him look like those arrogant aristocrats who threw away money on a whim because they could? And if it didn't, would it even be right to buy them something expensive? Would they expect him to buy them something like that every

time Christmas came around, or perhaps even for their birthday? There was just no way for him to know, and it was incredibly bothersome that he did not know.

And he was over thinking things again. He really needed to stop doing that.

"Then why don't we have some lunch first," Ms. Crawft said, interrupting Harry's thought process. "It's nearly noon now, and Daniel's not expecting us back for another few hours, at least."

Harry frowned at the thought of Lisa's father, but put the man out of his mind and nodded at the woman.

"That sounds like a splendid idea. I'm famished."

"Yeah," Lisa said with a small hint of sarcasm, "because sitting in a movie theater drinking coke for an hour is hard work."

"When you're watching a movie as bad as Beauty and the Beast, it is."

"You take that back!"

"No, no, I don't think I will."

Mrs. Crawft shook her head as she led the two bickering children to the nearest cafe. She probably would have chosen to eat at the new McDonalds that had opened up, a very popular fast food chain from the colonies, but knowing Harry's habits and hatred of unhealthy food, caused the woman to choose a small open-air cafe where the best friend of her daughter could have something that wouldn't, in his words, 'clog his arteries with filth and give him heart disease at the age of twenty.'

After a nice lunch in which Harry had a ham sandwich, a side salad and a fruit smoothy, while Lisa's mother ate a simple Caesar salad and her daughter had a roast beef sandwich, the trio walked down the streets of muggle London to do some Christmas shopping, or at least browsing the stores for ideas on what to get for Christmas.

Muggle London was so different than magical Britain, a contrast so

startling it made Harry wonder how two such dissimilar worlds could exist on the same plain of reality. Most of the buildings all looked very similar, large square buildings of brick containing several windows. A few would differentiate themselves with small decorations, a flag here, a awning there. Several buildings would be made of different colored bricks, some of the corner buildings would have different styles of architecture, and then there were the more historic looking buildings, but the vast majority all looked generally the same. Nothing at all like Diagon Alley where most of the buildings were so personalized it looked like someone had taken different types of architecture from various countries and times and stuck them together in the same place.

As they walked along the street, Harry took note of several places to check for presents. The first was a jewelery store. He was not one 100 percent positive to the veracity of his knowledge, but according to some of the books Lisa read, women liked jewelery.

Of course, that in itself presented a problem. There were so many different types of jewelery it was almost ridiculous: earrings, rings, necklaces, bracelets and so on. And that said nothing about the different styles and cuts and everything else that went into creating jewelery. Harry knew that back before the industrial age, it had been Jewelsmiths who worked to create jewelery for the nobility.

Jewelsmiths were kind of like a combination of blacksmith and jeweler who possessed a wide array of skills: goldsmithing, stonesetting, engraving, wax-carving, lost-wax casting, forging and polishing. The best jewelsmiths before the modern era were masters of their profession, who would pass down their teachings from master to apprentice.

The days of jewelsmiths was gone now, however, and Harry knew that most jewelery was created using far less original means. These days, bench jewelers often used a molding process to mass produce copies of an original design. It was quicker to make jewelery and loads cheaper, but Harry felt something got lost in the process, and it wasn't just originality.

If he did decide on getting his friends jewelery, he would most definitely be getting them the kind that was hand made and not the garbage most

stores seemed to focus on selling these days.

"You're spacing out again," Lisa commented as she walked by his side, "are you sure you're alright, Harry?"

"I'm fine," Harry sighed, "just trying to think of what I should get for everyone."

Lisa raised an eyebrow.

"How many people do you have to buy presents for?"

"Eleven. You, my friends from school, and your mother."

"So you've actually made friends at this boarding school of yours?" Lisa's sounded skeptical. Harry didn't blame her. She knew that despite being fairly popular at their old school, he was still something of a recluse, and that she was the only person he considered a friend. It probably had something to do with the fact that she was the only person he willingly spent time with outside of school and sports.

Harry shrugged.

"It was bound to happen sooner or later."

"I guess," Lisa frowned, "still, I can't believe you've finally made other friends."

"That's not a problem, is it?" Harry asked somewhat worriedly. He saw the frown on her face when he mentioned his friends.

"No, of course not," Lisa assured him quickly, though it didn't sound very convincing. "I remember trying to convince you to actually make friends for nearly a year after we first met. I'm glad your making more friends." She tried to smile, but it came out wrong, like she was just barely holding back a grimace.

Harry sighed. He knew what she was thinking.

Putting an arm around her shoulder, he pulled her close to him.

"You know that no matter how many friends I make, you're going to remain my first and best friend, right?" he stated in a way that made it sound like a question. "No one could ever take your place, Lisa."

"I-I know that," Lisa stuttered, turning her head away from him and pretending to look at the many stores they passed. Harry raised an eyebrow, amused at how easily his friend became flustered, but eventually shrugged. Lisa was weird, always had been always will be.

Watching the pair, Mrs. Crawft smiled softly, which Harry suspected came from how pleased she was at seeing her daughter happy again.

"Oh, my, god!"

Harry's head snapped back towards Lisa as she rushed to the front of a clothing store so she could look at a dress being displayed on a mannequin in the window.

"Ohmygod! Ohmygod! Mum, look at this! It's one of the new Tiffany Princess dresses!"

Harry and Mrs. Crawft walked to where Lisa was practically pressing her nose against the window to gaze at the dress on the mannequin. While Harry knew little about female fashion, he had to admit that the dress was rather spectacular. A dress with a cute one shoulder style neckline with straps that split in two in the back, crystal rhinestone beading at shoulder and waistline, stylized pleats at the bodice with a gorgeous full skirt featuring cascades of curl hem ruffles. It was also ridiculously expensive.

"Can I get this for Christmas, mum?" Lisa asked, turning wide, pleading eyes on her mother. Mrs. Crawft shot her a look that was equal parts amused and exasperated.

"We'll see, Lisa."

Those three words appeared to make Lisa dejected. She hung her head and her shoulders slumped.

"So I guess I'll never be getting it then."

"I didn't say never."

Lisa gave her a mother a look.

"With the way you are it might as well be never."

XoX

The shopping trip lasted another two hours before Lisa's mother ushered them back to the car and drove them home. Harry and Lisa both sat in the back, his friend once again latching onto him like he was some kind of overstuffed teddy bear. He didn't mind, really, as he was quite used to her doing that, but he was confused about how she could get all embarrassed one moment and then be all cuddly the next.

It must be a girl thing, he decided. Girls were weird like that.

"I'm sorry we couldn't find anything for you to buy, Harry," Ms. Crawft said as she drove the car out of London and back to Surrey.

"It's alright, Mrs. Crawft," Harry said. He would have shrugged, but with Lisa using his shoulder as a pillow the task was made impossible. She was sleeping, and he didn't want to wake her. "I may not have bought anything, but I have a few ideas of what to get next time I head into London. Besides," he eyed Lisa for a moment, "I wouldn't have been able to buy some of my presents considering the company I'm keeping."

Mrs. Crawft huffed as she eyed the boy in the back seat.

"And there you go calling me Ms. Crawft again. Whatever happened to Anastasia."

"That was a one time thing that won't happen again," Harry told her firmly.

"You just love getting my hopes up, don't you?" Mrs. Crawft teased the boy. Harry sent her a quick smile that had her huffing in mock indignation again. He imagined that if she were not currently driving a car, she probably would have put her hands on her hips and started pouting at him.

They eventually reached Surrey and drove down the neighborhood the Crawft's house was located in. The car soon drove into the driveway and stopped.

"Harry, be a dear and wake up my daughter," Ms. Crawft said as she stepped out of the car.

"Very well," Harry replied.

As Lisa's mother got out of the car and moved to open the garage, Harry turned to see his best friend sleeping peacefully. He was not surprised she had fallen asleep. The girl had a bad tendency to become over excited and often exhausted herself.

"Lisa. Lisa. Come on, Lis, you need to get up. We're home."

"Nggg..." Lisa groaned and buried her face further into his shoulder.

"Jus... five more minutes..."

Harry sighed and promptly poked her in the side. The squeal she let out as a consequence was quite loud. Harry thought he actually saw the glass of the car windows rattling for a second.

"What was that for, you jerk!?" Lisa half shouted at him as she rubbed the side of her ribs where Harry poked her.

"We're home," he informed her without hesitation, "and you weren't waking up."

His best friend grumbled, but eventually followed him out of the car and into the house via the garage where Lisa's mother waited for them. Together, the three made entered the house and were met with the sound of the news cast reporting on a car crash in Newport. That meant Lisa's father was home from work.

This fact was confirmed a moment later when Mr. Crawft appeared in the doorway that led to the living room. He looked at the group for a moment, his eyes falling on Harry, narrowing, then moving back to his wife.

"Anne, Lisa," he greeted his wife with a kiss and his daughter with a stoic

nod. He did not greet Harry.

Harry sighed. After the much older man caught him and Lisa hugging in the hallway and attempted to throw Harry out had it not been for Mrs. Crawft taking him into their room and giving what sounded like a very stern lecture, he had not been very pleased. The argument had been quite loud, and he and Lisa managed to hear every word said from within his friend's room. Their debate, if one can call that shouting match such, ended when Lisa's mother told Mr. Crawft that if he threw Harry out, she and Lisa would leave as well. The two had reappeared moments after, Mrs. Crawft smiling and telling the pair to get ready for dinner, and Mr. Crawft sulking and glaring silently at Harry.

It looked like with his path to kicking Harry blocked by Mrs. Crawft, Lisa's father had determined that ignoring him was the best option.

Harry did have to wonder why the man was so adamant on not liking him. While he and Mr. Crawft never really gotten along, the man had never been so adamant on not allowing him to come over.

He dispelled his wonderings. It was pointless pondering something he not only had little information beyond incomplete observations, but also didn't know what the banker was thinking. That he had no way of getting into the man's head—he did not know legillemency, after all—and finding out what Mr. Crawft's problem was made fixing said issue untenable.

"Harry, why don't you and Lisa go watch a movie or something while I get started on dinner," Mrs. Crawft suggested. Mr. Crawft looked like ready to protest, but at the last moment changed his mind. Shaking his head, he told his wife that he would be in his office doing some work for a new client who opened an account today, and quickly left immediately after. Lisa's mother made her way into the kitchen while Harry and Lisa walked into the living room.

"What do you want to watch?" asked Harry as he began searching through the movie selection the Crawft's had. There were quite a few, most were for a younger audience such as Fantasia, 101 Dalmatians, The Fox and the Hound, and The Great Mouse Detective. There were also a few history documentaries that he knew they kept because he

liked them, most of them focusing on his favorite historical and mythological figures like the Hound of Ireland Cú Chulainn, Gilgamesh the fifth king of Uruk, the Legend of King Arthur, and even a few of the more recent figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte.

"Hmm..." Sitting on the couch Lisa tapped her cheek in thought. "Since we saw a movie I wanted to watch at the theater today, I guess we can watch something you want to watch now."

Harry took that to mean she would let him watch whatever he wanted, but would most likely become bored and fall asleep if he chose one of the documentaries. He decided on a compromise by putting on *The Hitman*, which was not a historic movie of any kind, but at least starred Chuck Norris.

"Chuck Norris doesn't call the wrong number, you answer the wrong phone."

Of course, seeing as the movie starred Chuck Norris, it simply wasn't complete without Chuck Norris jokes.

"When Alexander Bell invented the phone he had three missed calls from Chuck Norris."

"Chuck Norris has a grizzly bear carpet in his room. The grizzly bear isn't dead, it's just too afraid to move."

"Fear of spiders is arachnophobia, fear of tight spaces is claustrophobia, fear of Chuck Norris is logic."

"There used to be a street named after Chuck Norris, but it was changed because nobody crosses Chuck Norris and lives."

"Some wizards can walk on water, Chuck Norris can swim through land."

"Chuck Norris can cut through a hot knife with butter."

"Chuck Norris and Superman fought each other on a bet. The loser had to start wearing his underwear on the outside of his pants."

And that was how Mrs. Crawft found the pair. Lisa with her head on Harry's lap as she and the raven-haired boy ran through the gauntlet of Chuck Norris jokes.

"Death once had a near-Chuck Norris experience."

"Chuck Norris counted to infinity—twice."

"Chuck Norris is the reason why Waldo is hiding."

"Chuck Norris once kicked a horse in the chin. Its descendants are known today as Giraffs."

"When Chuck Norris does push-ups, he isn't lifting himself up. He's pushing the world down."

"There is no theory of evolution. Just a list of animals Chuck Norris allows to live."

"Chuck Norris does not sleep. He waits."

"Chuck Norris starred in all three Star Wars movies... as the Force."

"Okay," Lisa chuckled, "I have to admit, that one was pretty good."

Harry looked smug.

"I know."

"And if you two are quite done," Ms. Crawft started, interrupting the pair before they could get going again. "Dinner's on the table."

Dinner that night was a simple affair. Lisa's mother made Pincetta Wrapped Stuffed Chicken Cutlets, one of Harry's favorite Italian dishes. Lisa and Harry spent most of the night talking about what they would be doing tomorrow. The female of the duo was a bit disappointed when Harry told her that he would be heading out early to buy some of the Christmas gifts he'd decided on getting without her, but relented when he told her that he would be back by one p.m. at the latest and they would spend the rest of the day doing whatever she wanted.

Mr. Crawft was not too happy to know that Harry would be spending more than half the day at the park with his daughter—the two decided to have a picnic—but a stern glare from Mrs. Crawft forced him into silence. All he could do was sulk and send mild glares across the dinner table at Harry while he thought no one was looking.

After dinner, Harry and Lisa sat in front of the television again, this time watching 101 Dalmatians. Harry wasn't a big fan, but Lisa enjoyed the story, and at least it wasn't Beauty and the Beast.

The pair would eventually fall asleep like that, and Harry would wake up the next day to find Lisa's mother had put a blanket over them.

XoX

Diagon Alley was even busier than usual. There would normally be upwards of one-hundred witches and wizards roving the alley and shops at any given time. Now it looked as if there were more than a thousand.

The street were jam-packed with people bustling to and fro, pushing and shoving as they made their way into specific stores so they could get on with their holiday shopping. Mothers clutched their children's hands tightly so they would not get separated amidst the chaotic throng of human bodies. Fathers had their youngest children riding on their shoulders to keep them from being trampled by beings three to four times taller than they were. It was, in a word, mayhem. The entire alley was in frantic disarray as everyone tried to get their Christmas shopping done.

Harry casually wove his way through the throng of people, gliding through the mass of flesh and clothing that bunched around him like a parody of a blanket. The only good thing he could see from having so many people crowded into a single area was that no one would notice through the mass of bodies.

Not that it mattered if they actually looked at him. He didn't really look like himself at the moment. With messy blond hair and high cheek bones, Harry looked more like an aristocrat's son than himself. The only features he had been unable to mask was his messy hair style, emerald green eyes, and the scar on his forehead currently hidden underneath his hair. For some reason, his magic could not hide those features. He assumed it

was because they were such an innate part of him that his magic simply refused to hide them.

Following the directions he had received from Tom, Harry made it to one of the many stores lining the alley. The store in question appeared to have been taken straight from the first century. A medieval building made of worn bricks with a thatched roof and a large chimney. There were no windows to this store, only an entrance that used a curtain to keep from revealing the interior instead of a door.

Harry pushed the curtain aside and entered. The first thing he noticed was how very cluttered the store was. Filled with tables and stands that contained all kinds of items he could only assume were magical in nature, the tiny shop contained very little room to move about in.

The shop itself was not very large, making Harry suspect the owner was not using any kind of magic to expand the store. Or maybe this was just the room where all of the items being sold were kept. He noticed that there was a doorway near the back behind a counter. Harry didn't know all that was involved in enchanting. Perhaps some forms of enchantment required powerful and complex rituals that required a lot of space, and the room in back took up most of the expansion charm? Or maybe he was just over thinking things, as was his wont.

"Ah, a guest, and one so young, too."

From the doorway in the back came a woman so wrapped in clothing that the only thing Harry could distinguish were yellow eyes glowing like twin moons. She dressed in what appeared to be a combination of a witches robes and clothing from India. Her long, dark purple robes had more accoutrements than he had ever seen on a person and clung to her womanly frame yet revealed very little he could discern. A dark cowl wrapped around her entire head, covering all but her eyes and giving her a mystical appearance.

She walked forward with slow, measured steps, stopping in front of Harry and examining him.

"And what can Madam Amora do for you, young one?" she asked in a misty voice that Harry supposed was designed to add to her mystique.

"I was told that you were the best person to go to for people who wanted something enchanted," Harry answered. "I was hoping to ask you about your price range for custom enchantments."

"That would depend on what I am enchanting," the woman replied in her airy voice. "Different items have different enchantments."

"Jewelery mostly," he told her, "though depending on what enchantments you can provide, I may also have you enchant some clothes as well."

"Hmm..." The woman looked at him for a moment in silent contemplation. Her eyes looked like they were piercing his soul, and were more than a little disconcerting. He wondered if she had some kind of glamour charm over her eyes. Yellow was not a natural color. "I can enchant both jewelery and clothing. The price range on enchanting both vary depending on how well they are made and the materials used in their creation. Materials that can contain and project magic easier such as gold, silver, and acromantula silk and dragon hide take less time and energy to enchant, and are therefore cheaper. More mundane materials like platinum and cotton, however, are much more expensive because it requires more time and several extra rituals for the enchantments to hold."

Harry nodded, pulled out a sheet of paper from his robes and handed it to the woman.

"I have hear a list of all the things I would like to have enchanted. I would like to know what kind of enchantments you can put on them, and how much each of those enchantments will cost."

Madam Amora looked over the list, nodding and humming to herself.

"For clothing, I offer most of the basic enchantments; automatic repairing charms, stay-clean charms, growth charms, animation charms and color changing charms. Those all cost fifty galleons each. I also have a list of defensive enchantments. Fabric hardening wards, camouflage runes, and a basic shield charm that can block minor hexes, but will disintegrate if hit by something like a powerful cutting curse. Those cost two hundred galleons. There is an additional twenty-five galleon cost if something like wool or cotton is used, since they do not conduct magic very well."

"Jewelery is a bit more complicated. For anything made of gold or silver, the standard fee is fifty galleons. If they have any precious gems such as diamonds, opals, emeralds, and amethysts an additional cost of twenty-five galleons is added. Anything made of platinum costs one-hundred galleons to enchant instead of fifty. The enchantments are also different. Most of my enchantments for jewelery center around basic animation charms, color changing charms, and pattern creation charms. Those cost twenty galleons each. Other enchantments I have are keep-polished charms, unbreakable charms, keep-away charms, which cost fifty-five galleons each."

"What about defensive enchantments?"

"I only have one for jewelery," Madam Amora admitted, "and it is quite pricy. It's a defensive ward that can detect when something hazardous to the health of the wearer, such as poison or love potions, is in their food or the atmosphere. That one costs two-hundred-and-fifty galleons, as it takes a good deal of time and effort to properly create the enchantment, engrave the runes and cast the wards."

Harry nodded and began calculating how much each charm would cost.

"How many enchantments can you add to a single item? And is there an added cost for doing so? Or will it just cost the additional amount for each enchantment?"

"I can add as many charms as you would like, however, I can only add as much runes as the space on the item allows. For something like a ring, that means I can only add one runic scheme. Necklaces, depending on the size of the chain can have up to five, the same with bracelets. Clothes on the other hand can handle many more runes. I usually stitch them on the inside, though I can add them to the outside as well if you do not care about fashion or want them stitched into a design. There is no added cost beyond the cost of the enchantments themselves."

After a moments thought, Harry decided what he to do.

"In that case I'll come back with the items I want enchanted, as well as a list of enchantments for each item. How do the payments work?"

"As there is always the margin for error when enchanting, I always receive half the payment before the enchantments, and the rest after they are complete."

"Very well," Harry said after a moments contemplation, "in that case, I just have one last question."

Madam Amora raised a single, delicate eyebrow.

"And that is?"

"Would it be possible for me to stay and watch while you work on the enchantments?"

XoX

Harry and Lisa were sitting down on a large blanket that had been spread out on the grass of the park, a picnic basket in front of them. As promised the moment Harry returned he had taken his friend out to the park for a picnic—after hiding some of the presents he had gotten in his room and making some basic food for the two of them, of course.

"Isn't this romantic?" Lisa gushed as she and Harry ate the food he made for them, Tortini salad, chicken tortilla roll-ups, cold-cut sandwiches, and a side of fruits and vegetables.

"Not really." Harry took a bite out of one of the roll-ups, chewed, and swallowed before speaking again. "We've done this so many times the novelty of any kind of romance has probably worn off by now." Granted, he knew very little about romance beyond the books Lisa forced into his ears, but he doubted the romance in those trashy novels had any basis in reality.

"Ugh, you're such a killjoy sometimes, Harry," Lisa complained, "can't you let me have my moment here? You could at least *pretend* we're having a romantic getaway or something," she grumbled at the end.

Harry blinked.

"Why would I do that?"

Never mind the fact that he didn't have time for romance, and was not really interested in it, the thought of a *romantic situation* with his sister figure would just be awkward. He knew the girl just wanted to pretend she was in one of those novels she read so much, but this was one area he wasn't quite comfortable indulging her in.

Lisa huffed, then sighed in dejection.

"Never mind."

Harry shifted again at the disheartened look his friend possessed. His mind was at war. Contrary to the often cool and collected persona he usually projected, or had been projecting until recently, Harry did not like to see his friend sad. It hurt in ways he really couldn't describe, and didn't want to contemplate.

On the other side of the coin toss, he really, *really* did not want to pretend he was having a romantic affair with his sister in all but blood. Harry may not know much about relationships, but if there was one thing Lisa's horrid books instilled in him, it was a sense of taboos. Incest seemed to be one of the more frequent ones her stories contained.

It honestly made him wonder why those books were not in the adult section of the library.

It also made him wonder if perhaps his best friend-slash-sister figure was one of those people with a serious brother-complex.

He really hoped that was not the case.

Before his thoughts on the stupidity of leaving books that lowered the morality of impressionable young girls in places said females could find them traveled any further, five people entered the park. Five very familiar and unwanted people.

"Well, well, well, look at who we have here. The freak and his little *girlfriend*."

Standing before them were none other than Dudley, Peers and three other members of their little gang: Dennis, Malcolm and Gordon. The one in

front, of course, was Dudley, arms crossed and a smirk on his face while the four behind him tried to look intimidating.

They failed spectacularly.

"I hadn't realized you came back from the stupid school of yours? What was it called, Warthog?"

Peirs and the other three idiots broke into laughter. Harry sighed.

"Bugger off Big Dork!" Lisa glared at the group of idiots who had ruined her time with Harry.

"Shut up, you stupid bint," Dudley sneered at the brunette, "I wasn't talking to you."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the boy.

"You're being awfully bold today, Dudley," he said in a low voice, "insulting my best friend like that. I've injured you for offenses that were far less momentous. I suggest you be careful about what you say from here on out."

It had been a long time since Harry had threatened Dudley and his friends with violence. Two and a half years to be exact. The last time he had done so was when he caught Dudley and his friends picking on some new kid at school. By that point in time, the boys were already afraid of Harry, and after a few well placed threats and some basic intimidation tactics, they were running with their tails tucked between their legs.

While three of the five idiots suddenly looked uncertain and a tad frightened, probably remembering what happened the last time they crossed Harry, Dudley and Peirs only sneered at him.

"You don't scare me anymore, Potter," Dudley growled as he cracked his knuckles. "I've joined Smelting's boxing team. Your little kung fu's not gonna be enough to save you now!"

"So you've begun practicing pugilism. Do you really think that will help

you here?"

Dudley's face, and those of his friends, twisted into an expression of boorish confusion.

"What?"

"It means boxing, Dudley," Harry told him in a mocking tone. "Honestly, you practice a sport your not even familiar with. You are quite stupid, you know that?"

Dudley's face morphed into an expression of trollish anger. It was the look of someone whose intelligence was less than nil and barely managed to realize they had just been insulted. Harry knew it was wrong, but he took dark amusement in seeing that expression.

"Are you making fun of me!?"

"Of course not, I merely stated the truth." Harry stood up and opened his arms in a wide, encompassing gesture that looked almost compassionate ,were it not for the mocking smile on his face. "After all, Dudley, you really are an idiot."

With a roar of anger, Dudley charged the raven-haired boy, intent on causing immense physical harm to him. There was no form in his charge, he had even foregone the basic boxing stance in favor of pulling his fist back to deliver a punch. The boy was wide open.

Harry did not attack at first. He simply stepped away so Lisa would not get caught up in the fight and accidentally injured. His eyes studied the other four while Dudley charged, making sure he was between them and his friend at all times.

Then Dudley was upon him. The pulled back fist was launched forward. It was slow. Too slow. Heavyweight boxing of the kind Dudley likely practiced was more a matter of strength than speed, which suited Dudley quite well, but made him ill-prepared to counter the speedy movements that Harry's martial arts was based on.

Harry tilted his torso to the left, allowing the fist to graze past his side,

ruffling his shirt. His left hand came up and latched onto the offending forearm in a vice grip as Harry spun 180-degrees, bringing the arm that tried hitting him up and over his shoulder. His right foot slid backwards as he lowered his center of gravity. Then Harry yanked, using a combination of leverage, Dudley's momentum and weight against the boy to perform his move.

Dudley screamed in surprise as he was suddenly hauled off the ground as if he weighed less than a feather, flew up and over Harry, then hit the ground with a loud, harsh thud. There was a '*whoosh*' of air as all the oxygen left the boys lungs. Tears sprang to Dudley's eyes as he curled around his stomach, gasping for breath on the grassy ground.

The sound of feet running across grass was heard behind him. Harry spun, rotating as he side stepped a fist launched by Malcolm. His hand shot forward and slapped his wrist, further moving the arm away from Harry and also leaving the other boy off balance. As Malcolm stumbled, Harry stepped forward, into his guard, and launched a double-palm strike to the large boy's stomach and chest.

Malcolm crumbled like a house of cards.

Dennis and Gordon looked like they were about to run, but a shout from Peirs had them charging forward regardless of their fear. Harry withheld a sneer. They really were stupid.

The two charged straight at him with no sense of subtlety or tactics, as if they could overwhelm him by presenting a two-on-one fight. They reached him at the same time, but Gordon, the quicker of the pair, tried to punch him first. Harry took a single step backwards, grabbed the boy's fist before he could retract it, then pulled him into the punch from Dennis that was meant for Harry. There was a loud thud as the fist impacted against the side of Gordon's head. The boy stumbled, disoriented from the hit to the temple, and Harry put him down quickly with a jump spin hook kick to the face.

A loud *crack* proceeded Gordon tumbling backwards, falling to the grass, unconscious before he even hit the ground.

Harry looked over at Dennis, who stood frozen in shock and fear. He

offered the boy a smile so cold the other boy actually wet himself on the spot.

"Boo!"

With a squeal of fright not dissimilar to a pig about to be gutted, Dennis took off like the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels.

By this point in time, Dudley had recovered from having his lungs violently discharged of oxygen. With tears still stinging his eyes he charged at Harry.

The boy sent a very basic boxing combination at the more martial-oriented combatant. It was clear to Harry that Dudley, despite his boasts, was very new to boxing and had no real clue what he was doing. The one two combinations sent his way were easily deflected.

Using a technique of side stepping to move around an opponent, Harry took a single step to the left and curved around. At the same time, a single foot moved out of position, tripping up Dudley and causing him to stumble. The small baby whale of a boy was then knocked out when Harry kicked his legs out at the knees, forcing him to kneel on the ground, and struck him in the back of the head with a knife strike.

With three of the five boys out of the fight and one having run away, Harry turned to last person of the little gang.

And promptly glared.

Peirs, having apparently been smart enough to realize they were still no match for him, had moved towards Lisa while Harry was distracted and was now gripping her with one hand by the hair while the other was over her mouth to keep her from screaming. Tears leaked from the girl's eyes as Peris painfully yanked on her hair.

Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously. It was one thing to pick a fight with him; it was another matter entirely to take his best friend as a hostage. The boy just made this fight personal.

He took a step forward.

"Stay back!" Peris shrieked, a high pitch wail of fright. "Don't come any closer! I'll hurt her if you do!"

Harry stopped moving forward.

"Hurt her and I will break you."

Peirs shuddered at the tone. It wasn't just because of how cold it was, but the promise it held. Harry rarely ever gave such blatant threats, preferring subtlety to outright threats. That he did so now meant Peirs had just stepped over the line.

"You can't do anything to me!" Peirs' voice cracked as he spoke. "You can't touch me! Not while I've got her!"

"Are you so sure of that, Polkiss?" Harry asked, his voice soft, threatening. Dangerous. "Are you so positive I need to be within reach of you to hurt you? Are you willing to test that theory?" His voice grew lower and lower until it was almost a whisper that somehow still managed to carry over to the terrified boy. "Are you willing to test me?"

Peirs had a moments hesitation. That hesitation cost him.

Surprisingly, it was not Harry who capitulated on the moment, though he had been about to do so. It was Lisa.

The cute brunette bit Peirs' hand, hard. The boy yowled in pain and let the girl go to grab his now bleeding appendage. That was his second mistake. With his attention focused on his wounded hand, he didn't even notice Lisa standing up and whirling on him with an angry glare. The girl, her anger and hurt fueling her strength, struck out with the single most powerful attack anyone could ever commit upon a male.

She struck him between the legs.

Lisa had some really powerful legs from her dancing lessons.

A high pitched squeal erupted from Peirs' mouth. His eyes went impossibly wide, hands moving to the most private and sensitive area on a male's body, clutching the now throbbing piece of flesh between his

legs as he crumbled to the ground, where he proceeded to cry and curl up into a ball, as if doing so would help with him deal with the pain.

"If you ever touch me again, I will kick you much harder," Lisa threatened the now crying boy who sounded not unlike a squealing rat as it was crushed by a boa constrictor. She turned back around, away from the pathetic sight, as Harry walked up to her.

"Are you alright?" her friend asked in concern.

"I'm fine." Lisa rubbed her head where Peirs had grabbed her hair. She winced, a hiss of pain escaping her lips. A few more tears tried to escape, but she held them in admirably. "It only hurts a little bit."

"Here..." Harry gently took her hand away from her head. "Let me see if I can help."

There was no visible damage to her scalp that Harry could see. It was not like she was bleeding or anything, and Peirs did not have enough strength to actually rip her hair out. But he knew that yanking hair on a person's head did tend to sting the scalp.

He took her face in his hands and gently bent her head down so he could place a kiss on it.

The term 'kiss of healing' often refers to the kisses a mother gives their child when they get injured. It does not actually heal, not physically at least, but it does possess a psychological effect on the child, making them feel better even if the wound is not actually healed. Healing kisses also have their place in pop culture, often referring to magical kisses that truly do manage to heal wounds with the power of love.

Harry's kiss ran more along the lines of pop culture. Due to his control over his own magic, Harry was capable of healing himself at remarkable speeds. Some might even call it superhuman. In some instances, his magic actually worked to heal him despite not being directed by his will to do so. That had actually been the reason he healed from the troll incident so quickly. Having released the entirety of his magic in order to gain the strength needed to kill the troll, he had quite a bit left over, coursing through his system unchecked and with nowhere to go. That left over

magic had gone to work on healing his body without him directing it.

Now Harry used his magic to heal another. It was more difficult than healing himself, as it was not simply a matter of channeling his magic to a wounded area and willing it to heal his body. Instead, Harry released a small trickle of his magic and directed it to his lips, then pushed it into Lisa with the intention of soothing her injured scalp. The reason he used a kiss was to avoid her asking the questions that were bound to come up if he used his hands and they suddenly started glowing.

He pulled back and looked at the now red-in-the-faced Lisa.

"Does it feel any better?"

"Ah..."

Lisa choked, her face glowing brighter and brighter until it looked like a small sun, causing Harry to frown. She swayed slightly and he wondered if perhaps she had taken more damage than he thought. Did yanking on hair really injure people that much? Or maybe he had simply used too much magic and her body, unused to having his energy coursing through her, couldn't take it in without becoming dizzy. Perhaps non-magical humans simply didn't handle magic very well.

"Yes," The girl managed in a strangled tone.

"Lisa," Harry looked concerned, "Are you really feeling better? You look a little faint."

"I-I'm fine," Lisa mumbled, suddenly finding a fascination with her feet. Harry's concern grew, but he quickly decided not to ask anymore questions. She probably just felt a little flushed because of the adrenaline leaving her body, he reasoned. It happened to people who were not used to having the flight-or-fight hormone pumping through their nervous system. The first time Harry had been pumped full of adrenaline had been his first ever spar with Master Wei, and he had been so exhausted afterward that he fell asleep right there in the dao.

"Why don't we head home so you can get some rest," Harry began. Lisa looked like she wanted to protest, but he didn't let her. "This picnic is a

bust anyways." He sent an irascible glare toward the four downed boys that were only now beginning to stir.

With quick efficiency Harry had the blanket, food and utensils all packed and the two began walking back toward the Crawft's home. Lisa seemed to have gotten over her moment of adrenaline fueled faintness and now clung to his free arm. He was glad she had recovered from the ordeal so quickly. It showed her fortitude in the face of diversity.

As they continued walking, she sent him a mischievous smile.

"You can't deny that our picnic was no longer romantic."

Harry blinked, then slowly turned his head to look at her, a single eyebrow raised.

"And how do you figure that?"

"Because you beat up the bad guys," Lisa stated, nodding her head with certainty. "Everyone knows that in every fairy tale romance, the hero always beats up the bad guys and then afterword, he and the Princess live happily ever after."

Harry rolled his eyes, but smiled all the same.

XoX

Late that night Harry sat on his bed reading *Guide to Advanced Occlumency*. Harry already knew the basics of the art, clearing his mind, sensing intrusion and expelling it, but he wanted to refine his technique. At the moment his ability to expel intrusion was to smash his magic against the intruding present. It was brute force at its finest. He knew there may come a point in time where simple brute force would not do the trick, and he preferred using finesse in everything he did anyway.

There were a number of fascinating means of both defense and offense when it came to defending the mind. Anything from trapping an opponent inside your own mind, reversing the legillemency and driving yourself into their mind, to even utterly destroying the sanity of those who tried to enter your mind and leaving them as nothing more than a non-responsive

vegetable. The number of ways to keep your mind from being invaded and damage your opponents mind when they tried invading it were quite literally infinite. It seemed that the only limitation was the Occlumense power, will and imagination, which were key factors for 'mental dueling' as Harry called it.

Harry already had a number of ideas on how to keep people out of his mind, and how to utterly crush them if they tried invading it. Now, if only he had someone to practice on...

Harry let go of his thoughts and looked out the window when he felt his partner's touch on his mind, like the soft caress of feathers against his cheek. A second later, Hedwig drifted in through the open window and flew over to him. She landed on his crossed knee, her claws only lightly touching him so they did not wound him.

"Hedwig," Harry sighed in exasperation as he saw the blood on his feathered friend's beak and claws. "Must you attack every carrier owl that comes to deliver something to me?"

Hedwig said nothing, no hoot, no indignant bark, nothing. She merely stared at him with those intelligent, amber-colored eyes.

"It's not their fault their owners sent them, you know."

Her chest feathers ruffled as she puffed herself up indignantly. Still, she did not 'talk.'

"How could they possibly know better?" Harry asked rhetorically, "It's not like any of the owls that come to find me are intimately familiar with me. They couldn't possibly know that you don't approve of others encroaching on your territory."

Hedwig finally released an annoyed trill.

"Yes, well, you should know that violence is never the answer."

Another trill. Harry blushed.

"That was different," he defended himself, "they insulted Lisa, and they

tried to attack us. I was simply defending myself. What are you defending?"

She trilled again, her eyes set in a blank look.

"Your right as my partner," Harry tested the words, then shook his head. "And you couldn't have resolved this through dialogue?"

Hedwig gave him a deadpanned stare and he sighed.

"Right, well, what did you fight over this time?"

The snowy bird held out her left leg. Attached to the leg was a very official looking envelope with the Ministry seal.

Taking the letter, Harry waved his free hand and several pieces of bacon flew over to them and floated in the air for Hedwig to eat. And while his faithful friend munched on her food, Harry broke the seal and opened the envelope so he could read the letter contained within.

Dear Harry James Potter,

To the Heir Apparent of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter. You have been cordially invited to attend the Ministry's 388th New Years Ball that will be happening on December 31st 1991 to celebrate the new year. Please note that dress robes are required.

Hope to see you there.

The Minister of Magic.

Cornelius Fudge.

Harry set the letter down, pondering this new development. This would be a good opportunity for him to scope out the current political power houses, as well as see where he stood amongst those who had been in politics for longer than he had been alive. A test to see how well he could keep up with those older and more experienced. However, there were a few things he would need to do first.

"Well, Hedwig," Harry said to the snowy bird still perched on his knee, "it looks like I'm going to need a little more help from Andromeda if I want to prepare for this."

Hedwig just gave him look that said 'must you interrupt me with your monologue while I'm eating,' and then she went back to eating the still floating treats.

She wasn't much of a conversationalist when she was hungry.

Just another chapter and the holidays will be finished. I'm beginning to suspect this story will run for maybe 26 chapters all together, give or take. So the end is coming near.

Before we end this, I would like to thank everyone who reviewed this last chapter. I post this story only because you guys keep informing me you like it. Reviews = love.

And once again, if you have any questions, comments, critiques, or if you have an infestation of hot, large-breasted aliens in your house and need help because your pelvis is being ground into a fine powder from getting worked too hard, please leave it in a review. And if it's the last one, you can rest assured that I will gladly give you all the help I can.

Christmas

Christmas

Susan Bones woke up on Christmas morning before Hannah did. Not that she expected any less. Her friend was not only lazy, but had also stayed up practically all night last night, spending almost all of her energy bouncing off the walls and talking about how fun her time in Italy was and how she was looking forward to seeing what presents she had gotten this year. The girl was probably knackered.

Sitting up, the red-haired Hufflepuff began stretching, raising her arms above her head as high as they would so and stretching out her legs underneath the covers of her sleeping bag. She luxuriated in the feeling of her stiff muscles loosening, giving a groan of satisfaction. Then she reflected that she would feel even better after taking a shower.

She stood up and took a moment to look around her room to make sure there was nothing she could trip over. Hannah had been a bit excitable last night and may have thrown something along her path.

Her room was fairly large and clean, with a spacious walk-in closet on one side, a queen sized bed on another, a dresser, a night stand and a desk. Hannah slept on the floor in her own sleeping bag next to Susan.

Looking over at the large bed, Susan reflected on when she and Hannah were younger and used to sleep on the bed instead of the floor. She could not remember when they started sleeping on the floor, but she did remember why it had become something of a tradition for them.

Back when they were younger, Susan's aunty had taken them both on a camping trip muggle-style. At first, neither of them had liked it, the tent was too small, there was no beds, no household commodities, and cooking over a fire took too long. Both she and Hannah swore up and down that they hated it and never wanted to do it again.

That belief had only lasted for a day. There had just been something nice

about camping without relying on magic. About sleeping on the floor in a sleeping bag. About doing things the muggle way, seeing how the other world lived.

Her aunty said it had something to do with being self-reliant. Most witches and wizards rely on their magic so much they don't know how to do anything without it, and they had forgotten how good it sometimes feels to just do things the old-fashion way. Susan agreed, though she had not quite understood everything her aunty talked about.

Dispelling her thoughts, the young redhead went into the bathroom and took an extra long shower. She doubted Hannah would be awake even after an hour in the shower. Chances are Susan would have to wake the girl. That was just how she was.

Turned out she was right. After stepping out of the shower in nothing but a towel, Susan found her friend still dozing away in her sleeping back. And so, after getting dressed in a pair of pants and a comfortable fleece jumper, the first year Hufflepuff went to wake up her friend.

"Come on, Hannah. It's time to get up."

Hannah continued to doze.

"Hannah, you need to wake up now."

Susan tried shaking Hannah awake, but all that did was make the blond girl turn over on her side, away from Susan in an attempt to ignore her.

Susan huffed. Hannah was so difficult to wake up sometimes. Well, not really. But Susan was far too kind and demure to use any of the wake up methods her aunty suggested. Some of those suggestions were just cruel.

Well, at least there was one method her aunty had suggested that was sure to wake her friend up and not be unpleasant.

"Hannah, if you don't wake up now you won't be able to open presents."

"What do you mean I won't be able to open presents?!"

And it worked, too. The moment the word 'presents' finished leaving Susan's lips, the blond miraculously snapped awake as if she had never been asleep in the first place. That sometimes made her wonder if the girl really was sleeping at all, or if she was just too lazy to get up and preferred to lounging around for several hours before actually doing anything.

When Hannah finally realized what was happening and what she just shouted, her face started to heat up. Susan smiled at her friend, before standing up.

"Come on, Melony probably already has breakfast ready. And if I know aunty, she's already up and waiting for us."

"Right, right."

Hannah got over her embarrassment quickly. She stretched out much like Susan had earlier, then wiggled her way out of her sleeping back and stood up. Once the blond got herself dressed she grinned at her friend.

"Alright, I'm ready!"

Shaking her head in amusement, Susan, Hannah following in her wake, walked to the dining room. As expected Amelia Bones was already waiting at the table, the Daily Prophet in her hands and a veritable breakfast feast spread out before her. The stern monocle wearing woman looked up when the two entered and smiled.

"Merry Christmas you two."

"Merry Christmas," the two girl's said together as they sat down at the table and began dishing up their food. Hannah went straight for the French toast and lathered it up in butter before soaking it in syrup. Being the healthier of the two, Susan had some eggs and a bagel with a glass of orange juice. Over on the other side of the table, Amelia Bones served herself some eggs and pancakes.

Breakfast never creased being a most interesting affair whenever Hannah came over. Lunch, too, for that matter. And dinner. The blond had always been a talkative girl. She could talk and talk and talk,

sometimes for hours without pause. Which was exactly what she did now.

Most of her conversation centered around what she had done in Italy. Really, she was just repeating a lot of what she told Susan last night, but since Amelia hadn't heard any of it due to being at work late, must have decided that reiterating her story was perfectly acceptable. Susan didn't mind. She was just glad to know her friend was happy. It probably helped that she didn't talk much herself.

"Your parents should be here in a few hours," Amelia told Hannah after casting the tempus spell to check the time. "Once they arrive, you two can start opening presents."

"Can we at least look at the presents so we can decide what to open first?" asked Hannah, her eyes large and pleading. Susan saw her aunty shake her head in amusement.

"I suppose you can," the stern woman allowed, "just don't shake the presents to try and find out what's in them. Some of them might be fragile and could break if you do."

With that warning left in their minds, the two went into the living room after breakfast. A large Christmas tree sat off to the side in one corner of the room, surrounded by boxes and packages wrapped in glittering paper. Several dozen feet from the tree, a fire crackled away merrily within the fireplace. Susan and Hannah spent the next half an hour sitting there, looking and sorting all the various wrapped packages by name.

The blaze of the fire soon turned green, signaling someone was flooding the house. Out of the large green fire stepped two people, Mr. and Mrs. Abbot. Both were blond-haired and blue eyed, though Mrs. Abbot had a lighter shade of blue and her hair was two shades darker. She had a willowy figure and was fairly tall, while her husband was a tad short and had a stocky build. The two wore smiles as they saw their daughter and her best friend.

"Hannah, Susan, did you two have fun last night?" asked Mrs. Abbot.

"Mum!" Hannah jumped up and rushed over to her mother, hugging the woman around the torso. She looked up at the woman with pleading

eyes. "Can we open our presents now?"

"Someone seems impatient," Mr. Abbot commented lightly. Mrs. Abbot smiled.

"I don't know," she began uncertainly, tossing her husband a wink that went unnoticed by Hannah. Susan saw it, though, and she had to stifle a giggle. "I mean, we just got here, and I would like to relax and drink a bit of tea with Amelia..."

"Please! Please, please, please, please!"

Susan hid her mouth behind her hands, lips twitching as she tried to keep them closed. It was always funny watching Hannah's mother string her friend along. It was made even funnier by the fact that every year she would do this, and every year Hannah would fall for it without fail.

"Let's at least wait for Amelia before you start tearing into your presents."

Hannah opened her mouth, no doubt to protest and whine, but was beaten by another voice.

"Don't worry, I'm already here." Amelia walked up to the two adults from the kitchen. "Nora, Andrew, it's good to see you two."

"Likewise," Mr. Abbot said as his wife greeted Susan's monocle wearing aunt with a hug.

"Mum?"

Mrs. Abbot looked down at her daughter and gave a theatrical sigh.

"Oh, alright, you two can begin opening presents now."

Hannah smiled brightly.

"Thanks, mum!"

While the adults spoke, Susan and Hannah began opening presents. Susan ended up getting a large number of very nice, very comfortable

looking muggle clothing from the Abbots. Most of what she received were jeans, which she always felt were more comfortable than any of the pants the wizarding world made. She also got a number of shirts, and a red jumper that matched her hair and complimented her milky complexion. Her aunt bought her several nice gifts as well, mostly Honey Dukes milk chocolate bars and her favorites, exploding bon-bons, small pieces of candy enrobed in chocolate that felt like they were exploding (in a good way) in your mouth. She also got an expensive wand cleaning kit, and a diary with ever-lasting pages so she could write about her time at Hogwarts.

She would be using that diary as soon as Christmas ended, maybe even before then.

Hannah got much the same as her, only with a bigger emphasis on clothes—she was more into fashion than Susan. She did get a few of her favorite candies, Honeydukes candy jars and fizzing whizbees, but not much more than that.

"Hey, Susan," Hannah called out from where she was sitting amongst a pile of boxes and torn wrapping paper. She looked very much like a child. In her hands she held two boxes in yellow and black striped wrapping paper that seemed to wave and undulate every few seconds. "It looks like we missed two. This one is yours."

Susan took the offered box from Hannah and looked at it curiously. On the top of the wrapped box was a card that said 'Susan' on it.

Taking the card, she opened the envelope, pulled out the card, and began to read it.

Dear Susan,

I wasn't sure what to get you, but I hope you enjoy what I bought.

Merry Christmas.

Harry.

"It's from Harry!" Susan gasped at the same time Hannah read her card.

The blond girl stopped, her eyes widened, then she grabbed the card in both hands and began to read more intently.

"It is from Harry!"

"Are they talking about Harry Potter?" asked Mr. Abbot to Amelia. The woman with the monocle nodded.

"Yes, I believe so."

"I heard tell from Hannah that they were friends with the Boy-Who-Lived, but I had not realized they were good enough friends that he would have bought them gifts."

"Mr. Potter is a very... unusual boy," Amelia said after a moment. "When I met him, I found him to be a very mature and intelligent child. At the same time, in many ways, he is just like any other child." She smiled. "And it seems your daughter and my niece have found their way into his confidence. Naturally, he would want to show his appreciation for them."

"I see."

Susan held the box, her hands almost shaking in anticipation. She didn't think Harry would have bought her anything, not after they just met a few months ago, but she could not deny that knowing he apparently liked her enough to get her a Christmas gift sent warm feelings through her body, a pleasant tingle, like those times when you sit next to a warm fire drinking hot cocoa as both fire and drink warms your body.

It also caused her face to feel unnaturally hot.

"Oh wow!"

Susan looked at Hannah who held a bracelet of some kind. It was made of gold, and had several charms on it that were animated to move and act like the animals they were designed after. There were four in total: a lion, a badger, a raven and a snake. The animals from the four Houses of Hogwarts.

"Hey, mum, check this out!" Hannah flashed the bracelet at her mother,

who smiled amusedly. "Isn't this a pretty bracelet?"

"actually, it's an anklet."

"A what?"

"An anklet," Mrs. Abbot repeated. "It's a piece of muggle jewelery. You put it around your ankle whenever you are wearing a skirt and sandals, though it could probably double as a bracelet when it's too cold to wear a skirt."

"Oh," Hannah blinked, "That's actually pretty cool. I didn't know there was jewelry that goes on your ankle."

"There's also toe rings that go on your toes."

Hannah's nose wrinkled a bit.

"That's just weird."

"Most people don't wear them."

"I can see why," Hannah said, before whirling on Susan. "Well, come on. Don't just sit there, Sue. Open it."

Susan did open her gift, unwrapping the wrapping paper with shaking hands to reveal a small box. Inside the box was, unlike what Hannah got, an actual bracelet. Its appearance differed from her friend's gift, made of silver instead of gold, and not possessing any charms. Instead, directly in the center of the chain was a bright red gem that burned and flickered as if it contained fire. It literally looked like there was fire dancing inside the gem. The fire would occasionally shift, wavering and morphing and changing shape. Sometimes it was a badger, others a lion. It occasionally turned into a raven, and still other times a snake.

"What did Mr. Potter get you, Susan?" inquired a curious Amelia. Susan went over and showed her aunty, who peered at the bracelet closely with the Abbots, while her friend peered over her shoulder.

"So pretty," Hannah whispered.

"It looks like the gem is a fire opal," Mrs. Abbot said, gaining the attention of Susan and Hannah. "It's a gem that is said to contain the fire of a phoenix, though no one knows if that's actually true. While they're not rare, they're also not easy to find."

"It looks like he has the gem enchanted as well," Amelia studied the gem closely. "Animation charms. Very advanced. I would hazard a guess and say he took these two items to an enchanter."

"That's pretty expensive, isn't it?" asked Mr. Abbot, "He must be quite wealthy."

"The Potters have always been a wealthy family," Amelia told him, "They were the wealthiest of the Founding Five families, and I can only suspect the gold in those vaults have gained even more wealth despite the war against You-Know-Who."

"Aunty," Susan looked at her aunt and held out the bracelet. A little ways away, Hannah was now barefoot and wearing one of the skirts her parents bought in order to see how the anklet looked on her. "Can you help me put this on?"

Amelia smiled and took the bracelet from her niece.

"Of course, Susan."

XoX

Tracey Davis enjoyed the simple things in life, like sleeping in whenever she could get away with it. Whether it be a holiday, a weekend, or a school day, Tracey enjoyed her beauty sleep. She wasn't lazy. Not exactly. She just liked getting as much sleep as possible before starting the day. There were few things she enjoyed more than sleeping.

Which was why she became most annoyed when her mum barged into her room with absolutely no subtlety whatsoever in an effort to wake her up.

"Good morning, Tracey!" the evil she-devil Tracey called mum greeted her with good cheer. Why couldn't this woman just let her sleep? And

why was she always so cheery this early in the morning? "Time to get up!"

Tracey had no intention of getting up.

"Not ready... five more minutes..."

"Now, now Trace," her mother continued with an amused smile. Tracey couldn't see it, because she'd buried her head in the pillow, but she could feel it, that annoying smile that caused her fits. "It's nearly nine o'clock, which means it's time for you to get out of bed." As if to place emphasize on the time, her mother walked over to the window and pulled the curtains apart, allowing the blinding rays of sunlight to stream in through the room and onto her bed.

Consequently, they also hit Tracey in the eyes, forcing her to roll over and bury her face even further into her pillow to escape the accursed, evil light.

"Tracey, it's Christmas, and if you don't get up right now, you won't be opening your presents."

Now that got Tracey's attention.

"Alright, alright! I'm getting up. Don't get your knickers in a twist."

Tracey quickly scrambled out of bed. How could she have forgotten that it was Christmas?

"Breakfast is on the table," her mother said as she moved out of the room, "oh, and don't forget to take a shower before coming down. I noticed that you didn't do so last night despite having been flying all day."

"Yeah, I got it," Tracey mumbled as she grabbed a pair of clothes before bounding for the shower. She took a much quicker one than normal, not willing to risk her mother's threat of not getting to open presents if she took too long. Then she got dressed in a pair of comfortable dark green pajama bottoms and a large Def Leppard T-shirt (her mother's favorite muggle band), before walking out of her room and down to the kitchen.

Both her mum and dad were already there. Her mother bustled about the kitchen, while her dad sat at the table, sipping a cup of black coffee while reading the morning newspaper. Tracey wrinkled her nose as she sat down and began putting a good sized portion of eggs and bacon on her plate.

"How could you possibly drink that crap?" she asked.

"Language, Tracey," her mum said as she flitted about the room, "honestly, where do you pick up these words."

"From dad."

Her father paled.

"Oh really?" her mother said as she turned to look at her father, "perhaps a night outside will teach him not to use such uncivil language in front of children."

"You are an evil, evil child," he whispered without a hint of malice as his wife turned away. Tracey batted her eyelashes at him innocently.

"Who? Me?"

Her father gave her a look of mild reproach, but Tracey ignored it to focus on her food. The sooner she finished eating, the sooner she could open presents.

They eventually adjourned to the living room, where Tracey began to tear into the packages with vigor. For some reason, she had always enjoyed the process of ripping wrapping paper apart. Her father once joked it was because she was as violent as her mum.

He got smacked in the back of the head and ended up sleeping on the couch for that one.

Of course, she would have enjoyed the presents more if her mum didn't insist on taking a picture of her after each gift she opened.

"Come on, mum," Tracey complained as she held a poster of Victor Krum

up and gave a big, strained smile. It was a fight not to grind her teeth.
"Do you always have to be like this?"

"Yes," her mother answered simply, smiling that annoying smile of hers.
"Now hush up and smile or it will take that much longer for me to take the picture."

Tracey sighed, but did as told. She wanted to open her presents after all.

By the time she finished opening all of her presents, the area around her looked akin to a disaster zone. Shredded bits of wrapping paper lay scattered, ribbons of many shapes, sizes and colors sat in tangled piles, and a large pile of presents found their place on the ground before her. She got a very good haul this year, she would admit. Among her presents Tracey had gotten a very expensive broom cleaning kit, several posters of her favorite Quidditch players and a few of her favorite muggle bands, and some of the cutest clothes she had ever seen, including a pair of dragon hide high-heeled boots that were probably more expensive than everything else she had gotten combined. The only disappointment was that she hadn't gotten the broom she wanted.

Sighing a bit, Tracey stood up and began collecting the paper. Her parents could have just vanished it all, of course, but her mother always insisted on making Tracey pick up after herself. She was evil that way.

"Tracey," her mother called, getting her to stop.

"Yes mum?"

"What are you doing?"

Tracey blinked.

"Um... picking up the wrapping paper?" she said uncertainly.

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?" Tracey asked, frowning at the amused looks being sent her way by both of her parents. That was never a good sign.
"You always make me clean up after opening presents."

Her mother's smile widened.

"And who said we're done opening presents?"

Tracey looked at the mess around her feet. Then she looked over at the tree. There were no presents under it anymore.

She frowned. Were they having at her?

"There's one more present left for you to open," her mother replied as her dad stood up from the couch and walked out of the living room. Tracey felt excitement and hope bubbling up within her as she saw her father come back out carrying a long present wrapped in silver and green wrapping paper that seemed writhed like snakes. A long, broom-shaped present.

"Is that... is that..." Tracey tried to speak, but found something hampering her. Her throat felt like it was constricting.

Her father gave the wrapped package to her with a large grin on his face. She took it, her hands numb, and stared at the object like it was some kind of alien.

"Well, don't just stand there like a lemon," her father urged. "Go on and open it."

Tracey did. The moment feeling returned to her body she tore at the wrapping paper like a woman possessed. Small pieces of silver and green flew everywhere as she ripped it and threw it away post haste. Her parents looked amused. They shook their heads at their daughter's antics.

"I don't believe," Tracey whispered in awe as she held the now unwrapped present in her hands. "A Nimbus 2000."

With a gleaming Mahogany handle, gold plating wrapping around the tail and beautifully arranged twigs at the end, the Nimbus 2000 was an innovative marvel, able to reach a maximum speed of 280 kilometers per hour. It was currently the fastest broom on the market, and she had just gotten it.

She looked up at her parents and practically lunged at them, somehow managing to wrap her dad in a hug with her left hand while keeping the broom away in her right. She did the exact same thing with her mother, all the while saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you," as a repeated mantra.

"Thank you so much for the broom, mum, dad," she said again one last time. She looked at the broom with a large, almost maniacal grin on her face. Oh, she couldn't wait to take this baby out and break her in.

"I don't know why you are thanking us," her mother said, the amusement in her voice clear for all to hear. "We didn't buy you that broom."

"What?"

Tracey blinked. Then blinked again. She gave one more blink for good measure, then looked from her broom, to her parents, then back to the broom.

"You didn't buy this for me?"

They shook their heads.

"Then who did?"

"You would know who bought you that broom," her father started, "if you had read the letter."

Tracey blinked some more. Her confusion was evident.

"Letter?"

"The letter the broom came with," her father informed her. "It's down there by your feet."

Tracey looked down at her feet to see that, indeed, there was a letter. It was in a green envelope with her name written in elegant cursive on the top in silver coloring.

"Oh."

Tracey blushed as she bent down and picked up the letter. She ignored her parents' snickering as she sat down and carefully set the broom in her lap—she didn't want to damage it after all—before opening the letter and beginning to read.

Dear Tracey,

Every good rider deserves a good broom.

Merry Christmas.

Harry.

After she finished reading the letter, all Tracey found herself capable of doing was staring at it with her mouth parted in surprise. The word shocked did not even begin to do justice to what she felt. No one, not even her parents, had ever bought her such an expensive and incredible gift. That Harry would do so for her made her heart want to soar out of her chest.

"I can't believe he bought me this," she murmured almost absently, her mind still trying to get around the fact that Harry Potter had bought her the best broom currently on the market as a birthday present. What kind of friend does that? Buys an expensive broom for someone they just met?

The awesome kind, obviously.

She looked up at her parents as she realized something.

"You two knew about this, didn't you?" she asked. She thought about giving them an accusing glare, but was too happy and too shocked to do much more than look at them with wide eyes.

"We did." Her father nodded at her. "We had actually been planning on buying you a new broom for Christmas ourselves. We had thought about buying a Nimbus 1700."

"But before we could, a snowy white owl showed up on the window sill to our bedroom window," her mother quickly took over. "It had a letter from

Harry, asking us if we had already bought you, or were planning on buying you, a broom. When we responded that we had not, but were planning to, he asked us not to and that he would take care of buying the broom." She shot an amused look towards her husband. "Your father took a bit of convincing before we told Harry to go ahead and buy it."

Tracey's dad grunted.

"I wasn't very pleased at the thought of a boy buying my baby girl such an expensive gift," he admitted, completely ignoring Tracey indignant squawk of 'Dad!' about being called his baby girl. "But Mr. Potter proved himself to be an upstanding young man when we met, and I don't think he has any ulterior motives for giving you such a nice gift. Still..." He looked over the broom gripped in Tracey hand and gave a petulant pout that made him look like a child who had all of his toys taken away. "It does make me feel rather inadequate to see a young boy buying my daughter a gift I had not been willing to spend money on myself."

Tracey rolled her eyes.

"Oh, get over yourself, dad. You got me more than enough gifts."

"So she says," her mother started with a smile, "but we all know that if you had not gotten a broom, you would have thrown a fit."

"I would not!" Tracey protested, even though they all knew it was a complete lie.

"Of course you would," her mother sniffed. "You, my dear daughter, are a brat."

Tracey growled under breath.

"Whatever. I'm going to break this baby in."

"Be safe, dear."

"Yeah, yeah."

As Tracey made her way to the backyard, a large grin spread across her

face, stretching from ear to ear. She had known that Harry was a cool person, but this gift he bought her just made it official.

Harry Potter was the most awesome friend she ever had.

XoX

As sunlight streamed in through the window to her bedroom, Daphne Greengrass opened her eyes and observed her surroundings with an attentiveness that made it seem as if she had not been sleeping at all. It was the price that came with the training she had received at the hands of her father. She was always alert, always ready in case the man whose blood ran through her veins came to wake her up at the crack of dawn for more training.

Seeing no one in her room, she slowly sat up and looked out the window. The sun was just now beginning to rise, slowly peaking out from behind the horizon and forest surrounding the Greengrass manor. Light pinks and orange hues were cast amongst the sky and sparse sprinkling of clouds, creating a beautiful panoramic scene that many master painters would pay an arm and leg to capture.

Daphne turned away from the view without a second thought. Her bare feet hit soft carpetas she began walking toward the bathroom with light, graceful steps, just as one would expect from a proper pureblood woman.

Like all parts of the Greengrass manor, her private bathroom was luxurious. Marble tiling, a beautifully crafted tub and shower combination, and a glass chandelier above. The gold used in the bathrooms creation caused beautiful refractions across the room as the light from the chandelier hit it, and the mirror near the black marble sink was decorated with many precious gems.

Daphne hated all of it. Hated the pomp and circumstance, the wealth, and the need for her father to show off his wealth even when nobody else would see this room but her.

She didn't even know why he bothered, considering he wasn't even really her father. Not anymore. Not since her mother died giving childbirth to her stillborn brother.

None of the disgust she felt at her extravagant surroundings, nor the sadness she still felt from her mother's death showed on her expressionless face as she stripped off the pale, silk nightgown and knickers she had worn to bed.

She went over to the shower and turned it on, stepping in without a thought. Cold water blasted her for a second, before the heating charms warmed it up. Soon, a thick steam covered the room in its white vapor, and Daphne began to wash herself.

She did not bother to rush, nor did she take an exorbitant amount of time. Like everything else she did, she was methodical, thorough, and economical in cleaning herself.

After she finished her shower, she stepped out and dried herself off with a towel. She grabbed another towel and wrapped it around her head in order to keep her hair out of her face, then grabbed a thick bathrobe and put it on. After that she would begin the process of drying and combing her hair. She did not put on any make up, she never did, even though her father had hired someone who taught her how to properly apply it.

Once finished with her morning ritual, she dressed herself in a pair of fine robes of a dark green that traveled down to her ankles, and made her way out of the bedroom.

Daphne did not need to walk very far to reach her first destination of the day. Her sister's room stood right across the hall from hers. She stepped up to it and gently opened the door, being careful not to let it open too loudly.

Astoria's room was much different than hers. It had the same extravagance, but unlike her room, which was spartan and bare, her sister's room had all kinds of animals and toys that littered the corners, dresser, and bed.

Daphne walked swiftly over to the large queen-sized bed located at the opposite end of the room. Her sister, who looked almost like a clone of Daphne except with hair a shade darker, was fast asleep, her mouth slightly parted as she breathed through it.

A change took place in Daphne as she watched her sister sleep. Her eyes softened, her lips curved into a gentle smile, and a strange glow seemed to emanate from within her. It was a look few people had ever seen on her, and one that few people ever would see. She could count the number of people who had seen her like this on one hand and still have more than half her fingers left over.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Daphne began running her hands through Astoria's hair in a fashion that looked more like the affection a mother held for her daughter than a girl had for her sister. She continued along this vein for a good while, simply waiting until her sister woke up naturally. Astoria did not need to wake up at the crack of dawn like she did.

A little past seven, her sister's features began to stir. Drowsy eyelids slowly blinked open to reveal ocean green eyes, another small difference between Daphne and her sister. The younger girl looked over at the eldest daughter of the Greengrass family and gave her a tired smile.

"Mornin', Daphne."

"Good morning, Stori," Daphne greeted with her own smile as she leaned over and placed a kiss on her sister's brow. "After you wash up, come down stairs. Emily has made us breakfast, and there are several presents waiting for you to open them."

Astoria's face lit up in an ecstatic smile, and before Daphne knew what hit her, the girl launched herself from her laying position and hugged her elder sister for all she was worth.

"Thank you."

She was released a moment later and her sister hopped out of bed and skipped her way into the bathroom.

Daphne made her way downstairs and entered the dining room, where her families house elf had prepared a smorgasbord for breakfast, consisting of all her sister's favorites, just like she had asked it too.

She sat down and waited until Astoria bounced into the room and sat with

her before having breakfast.

Breakfast, and mealtimes in general, was not a very lively affair at the Greengrass residence. Their father had made it abundantly clear that there would be no noise while eating at the table. To him, only barbarians spoke loudly and acted with disgrace while eating, not wealthy pureblood's like them.

Daphne wondered quite vindictively what her father would say if he knew Draco Malfoy acted like the worst kind of barbarian at the Slytherin table every time they ate.

After they finished breakfast, and Astoria thanked her sister again with another hug, the two adjourned to the living room where a bundle of presents sat waiting for the youngest of the two Greengrass children. And while her sister went over to the presents and began opening them, Daphne made her way to the couch and sat down to watch her sister.

Nathaniel Greengrass did not show up to celebrate with them. He had long stopped celebrating any of the holidays they had shared in when they were younger and her mother was still alive. This included Christmas.

Of course, her father did not call it Christmas. That was a muggle holiday, and as such was not fit for an upstanding pureblood family like themselves to celebrate. Instead, they celebrated, or had celebrated, yuletide.

Hypocrite. That was what her father was. A damn bloody hypocrite. He refused to even call what they did Christmas simply because he thought it was something beneath a pureblood family to celebrate, yet she knew for a fact that some of his clients, including a few who believed in the pureblood dogma spewed by people like Lucius Malfoy, celebrated Christmas.

Even Lucius Malfoy celebrated Christmas, if his son's boasting of the presents he got every year during Christmas was to be believed.

Daphne Greengrass sat silently, as befitted a woman of her status, and watched as her sister opened her presents. None of them were from their

father. Nathaniel had stopped buying them gifts long ago. All those presents were from Daphne, who carefully saved up most of her money each year so she could get her little sister gifts for the holidays and her birthday.

Sometimes, when she was sitting like this, Daphne would imagine what life would be like had her mother not died, had her brother not been a stillborn. Would they still be a family then? Would her father be the loving man she could hardly remember? Would she and the rest of her family be happy? She would like to think so.

Then she would dispel those thoughts, because dreaming and wondering about pointless 'what ifs' never did anyone any good. Whatever might have happened if her mother and brother had lived would never happen now, and she had to remain strong, for her sister if no one else.

"Daphne?"

Daphne did not even blink when she realized Astoria was right in front of her. She merely turned her head to look at the younger girl curiously.

"Yes, Stori? What is it?"

"There's a present here for you," Astoria said matter of factly. This time, Daphne did blink. A present for her? She had not received a present during Christmas for a long time, not during the actual day itself, at least. Mrs. Davis mother would likely have a Christmas gift for her that Tracey would give when they met, but that was about it.

"Do you know who it's from?" she asked, unable to quite contain her curiosity. She looked down at the small box her younger sister had set on her lap. It was tiny, maybe a bit bigger than the size of her palm. The box was neatly wrapped in silver and green paper that slithered like snakes. It came with a small card that had her name written on the top.

Astoria shook her head.

"Not a clue," she said as she sat down next to her sister. All her presents were already opened. She smiled at her older sister. "Why don't you open it and find out who it's from?"

Daphne nodded absently as she took the card and opened it, carefully reading the contents as Astoria looked over her shoulder.

To the Heiress of the Noble House of Greengrass.

I know we haven't really known each other long, but I wanted to get you a gift anyway. After all, even if purebloods don't celebrate Christmas, this is still the time where people should be in the spirit of giving.

I hope you like it.

Sincerely,

The Heir Apparent to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter.

Harry James Potter.

"Oh my gosh," Astoria whispered as she looked at the name written the bottom of the letter in neat cursive. "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh! You didn't tell me you know Harry Potter!" She sent an accusing glare her sisters way.

"I don't," Daphne stated as if it were a fact, though her tone was also laced with shock. "We've only just recently started talking." Which begged the question of why he bought her a gift. Why would he do something like this when she had not really done anything to deserve it? When she had been so rude to him before? Was this simply a matter of him wanting to buy her something? Or was there another reason for it?

Daphne immediately felt bad when her first thoughts were that of him trying to gain her allegiance. He had freely admitted that part of the reason he spoke to her that night in the room with the mirror was that he had hoped she would ally herself with him, but that he felt horrible for even thinking it afterward. She knew he was being honest. Even if he wore his mask well, he could not lie to someone who had been trained in the ways of a pureblood for over half her life.

She looked back at the bottom of the card and almost couldn't contain her snort of amusement. It looked like Potter—Harry—was learning a bit about pureblood society.

"Well," Astoria prodded her sister, "Are you going to open it?"

At her sister's urging, Daphne opened the present, carefully stripping away the wrapping until she reached the package.

Opening the small box, Daphne looked at the content inside and felt her heart skip a beat. Sitting there, on a small cushion, were a pair of tasteful earrings in the shape of two small snakes entwined with one another. One was silver, the other gold, making a wonderful contrast as they twisted around each other like a pair of lovers. At the end of each snake were two small diamonds like eyes, glittering as light coruscated off their polished, gleaming surface.

"Oh wow," Astoria breathed, "They're so pretty."

Daphne nodded, but did not say anything. *Could* not say anything. Something appeared stuck in her throat, preventing her from speaking. All she could do was stare at the beautiful and tasteful earrings like they were something alien.

She was so caught up in her staring that she didn't even notice when Astoria grabbed the top half of the box.

"Hey, Daphne," her sister finally brought her attention away from the gift. "There's a note in here." Astoria pulled out a small note that had been attached to the top of the box and handed it to her sister. Daphne took the note with slightly numb fingers and brought it to her face.

These earrings are special. They have been enchanted to detect harmful substances in their air or food around you. Whenever there is something near you, like poison or a love potion, they will grow warm.

I hope you never have need of this enchantment, but felt it better to be safe than sorry. Pureblood society is often fraught with treachery, or so I am told.

H.J.P.

"Daphne?" her sister began, sounding concerned. "Are you alright? You're crying."

Daphne shook her head, her hair catching light as it swung around her face. Delicate fingers came up and brushed across her cheeks in an attempt to wipe away the small silver tears that fell from her eyes.

"I'm fine, Stori," she murmured softly, "Just fine."

XoX

Her holiday break had been just as annoying as she had believed it would be. From the very moment they got home to Christmas day, her sister had yet to keep her big mouth shut once. She was always going on about every little thing, complaining about everything and nothing at the same time, and worse, she wouldn't leave Lisa alone about her friendship with Harry.

It was days like these where Lisa wished she was an only child. At least then she would be able to get some peace and quiet.

"For the last time," Lisa said, exasperated, "I am not going to send a letter to Harry asking him to meet with you."

Her sister, Elena Turpin, pouted at her.

"Why not?" she asked plaintively, "It's not like it would take that much time to write a letter and send it off. You could consider this my Christmas gift since I know you didn't get me one."

"You didn't get me one either, remember?" Lisa pointed out, trying not to grit her teeth in annoyance. Elena opened her mouth to begin jabbering some more, but she did not want to hear it. Instead of listening to her sister complain and whine, she focused on eating breakfast.

It was Christmas morning and both of her parents were still asleep. Her mother had pulled another all-nighter at Saint Mungos and her father just got back from a business trip with some associates. That meant making breakfast was up to her. Since Lisa could not cook that meant breakfast for today was a bowl of cereal and some milk. It wasn't the best breakfast she could think of for Christmas, but she had never been one to complain about such things.

Now if only her sister would shut up so she could eat in peace.

Of course, there was no way that was ever going to happen.

"So?" asked her sister. Lisa rolled her eyes.

"So why should I get you a present if you're not going to get me one?"

"Because I'm your sister."

"And I'm yours," Lisa countered irritably.

"Are you two arguing again?" asked the voice of Lisa's and Elena's mother as the woman in question walked into the room followed by her yawning husband.

"Yes," Lisa said at the same time Elena said, "No."

Their mother sighed in exasperation.

"Must you two always fight? It's Christmas. This is supposed to be a time of giving and love, not arguments."

"Blame Elena," Lisa grumbled in complaint, "she's the one who started it."

"I did not!" Her sister defended herself in what Lisa had always called her 'snotty princess' voice. "I was merely asking if you could send a letter to Harry Potter asking him if he would meet with me?"

"And what would you want to meet Mr. Potter for?" Their father spoke for the first time since entering the room. The man sat down heavily while his wife walked into the kitchen to make them some coffee.

"Because he's Harry Potter, of course." Elena rolled her eyes at her dad, as if he should have been able to divine her reasons without having her explain it. "You know, the Boy-Who-Lived? A big celebrity? Why wouldn't I want to meet him?" She crossed her arms under her breasts and huffed. "Last time I saw him, none of you would let me talk to him."

"Maybe that's why we won't let you meet him," Lisa commented as she

finished her breakfast and walked into the kitchen where she rinsed her bowl in the sink. "Because the only reason you want to see him is because he's a big celebrity." She ignored the glare her sister sent her and began marching out of the room. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to wait by the Christmas tree while you lot finish eating."

Lisa made her way into the living room where their Christmas tree was set up, sat down on the couch, and let her mind begin to wander.

It was very strange how most witches and wizards celebrate Christmas. Many purebloods denied it, claiming they were only celebrating the Yuletide, but the truth was Christmas had become a national wizarding holiday ever since Christianity became a major religion in the muggle world, which was around two-thousand or so years ago, give or take a couple of centuries. She always found it interesting how the muggle world affected the wizarding one, especially when it came to certain aspects like holidays.

A few minutes after she sat down and let her mind ponder why wizards celebrated Christmas when they weren't Christians, her parents and older sister came in.

"Presents!"

Lisa rolled her eyes as she watched her sister almost literally dive into her presents like a child on a sugar high. Sometimes she really had to wonder how Elena was the eldest of the two of them when she acted like she a five year old.

Sighing as her sister began ripping apart wrapping paper with indiscrimination, Lisa stood up and walked over to the tree where she, too, began opening presents.

She got much of what she expected, mostly books with a major focus on history. She received a few nice books about Greek mages of old, such a Medea of Colchis, and even several books on Japanese mages, though most of those were based on mythology and not actual facts. Still, while Myths and legends weren't necessarily her thing, there was always a grain of truth to what was said about them, and therefore she could consider them an important part of history.

Her parents also bought her a few clothes. A lot of them centered around some of the newer fashions for witches, robes that were sleeker and looked less like robes and more like dresses. No doubt her mum bought those. Her father had no taste in fashion, but her mother, while certainly not a fashionista like some people, knew a thing or two about clothing.

As she searched through the jungle of wrapping paper now surrounding the Christmas tree, her eyes caught sight of a small box with her name on it. It was wrapped in dark blue paper and had small silver birds on it that flapped their wings, obviously animated with an animation charm, and a card attached to it.

Taking the wrapped package curiously, Lisa opened up the card and began to read.

Lisa,

I know how much you enjoy history and thought you would like this present. It's not a book, but an item that played a significant part in the Four Founders lives, more specifically, it played an important roll in the life of Rowena Ravenclaw. I found it in a muggle shop in London, surprisingly, which might explain why I was able to buy it.

I hope you enjoy the gift and have a Happy Christmas.

Harry James Potter.

A smile worked its way onto Lisa's face as she read the note. Harry really was incredibly thoughtful, though she did frown when she realized he had gotten her a present and she had not gotten him anything.

Shaking her head and promising herself that she would get him something by the time they got back to Hogwarts, Lisa unwrapped the present with unmitigated excitement.

The box under the wrapping paper was brand new, with a clasp holding it in place. It looked like a muggle box rather than something made in the magical world.

She undid the clasp, opened the box, and gasped when her eyes laid

sight to what was contained within. Sitting on a dark purple cushion was a long, curved dagger glinting in the flames lighting the Christmas tree. The dagger was beautifully crafted, with a golden hilt in a silver and blue sheath with numerous sapphires embedded into it. She could tell the artifact was a goblin made ritual dagger. Very rare, and something most antique collectors would kill for. On the hilt was a single silver Raven, the symbol of Rowena Ravenclaw.

She easily recognized the dagger for what it was. There had been many paintings of the ritualistic dagger used by Rowena Ravenclaw in several history books. According to the books, Rowena had been incredibly talented at creating and performing complex blood rituals. Rumor had it that many of the wards around Hogwarts were created through the use of a powerful blood ritual that somehow impregnated the very grounds of Hogwarts with the blood and magics of the Four Founders. Whether that was true or not was a still raging debate that had never, and probably would never, be solved.

Grabbing the dagger with shaky hands, Lisa slid the blade out of the sheath with a slight hiss. The blade was made of silver, that much she could tell from the way it gleamed in the light, and there were numerous runes etched upon its surface. While Lisa didn't know what the runes were or did, she did know that they were designed to help complete magical rituals where blood was required, which had been a common practice during the Founder's time.

"What's that you got there?"

Lisa turned her head to see Elena leaning over her shoulder and peering at the knife curiously. She quickly re-sheathed the dagger and gripped it in a way that would make it hard to take from her, just in case her sister decided to make a grab for it.

"It's the ritual dagger Rowena Ravenclaw used," her words had both her parents turn their heads towards her and the dagger now clasped in her hand. They didn't look necessarily pleased that she had gotten something sharp and pointy, but Lisa didn't care. She was holding a piece of history in her hands. "It was a gift from Harry."

"What!?" Elena screeched, making Lisa wince. Merlin her sister was loud. "You mean to tell me you got a gift from Harry Potter!? That is just so... so..."

"Cool."

Elena gave Lisa a deadpan look that made her want to laugh.

"I was going to say unfair."

XoX

Harry felt completely relaxed as he stepped out of the shower after his long, hard work-out. Many people would call him crazy for exercising during the holiday, but his recent sparring sessions with Master Wei proved that he needed to up his training, since the lack of a sparring partner at Hogwarts was negatively impacting his performance. He needed to pick up the slack somehow.

Grabbing a towel, he dried himself off, then wrapped it around his waist and walked out of the bathroom and into the hall. The guest room didn't have its own bathroom, so he had to use one several doors down. That was fine with him, it wasn't like anybody was awake at this hour.

Entering his room, Harry closed the door behind himself and made his way toward the drawer, where he kept the few articles of clothing he brought from Hogwarts.

There wasn't much of a selection: three pairs of jeans two of which were black, a couple of T-shirts, underwear and socks. Shrugging, he grabbed a pair of black jeans, a dark green T-shirt, his undergarments and a pair of white socks, then placed them on the bed.

He peeled off the towel and carefully folded it up. He would put it somewhere it could dry later as he had only used it once since washing it. Then he picked up his skivvies.

He was just about to start getting dressed when the door slammed open and Lisa Crawft's greeted him loudly and cheerfully.

"Happy Christmas, HarrrRRYYYYAAAHHH!"

Acting with the haste of someone caught in an embarrassing position, Harry dove to the other side of the bed just as Lisa screamed and slammed the door shut again.

Harry felt his cheeks grow inflamed as he realized his best friend had just seen him in his birthday suit. How embarrassing was that?

"Lisa!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't realize you were naked!"

As Lisa babbled apologies from behind the door, Harry rushed to get himself clothed. At the same time, his face felt like someone had cast *incendio* on it. This, of course, was because his best friend seemed to have a habit of mentioning how she had seen nude state in between every, 'I'm sorry', she said, which made it even more humiliating.

God, he really wished he didn't have eidetic memory right now. How was he supposed to look at his friend after this, when each time he did he would remember how she had seen him naked?

After he finished getting dressed, Harry took several deep breaths and attempted to clear his mind. It would not do for him to let this fluster him. It was beneath him to get so embarrassed over something like this, he told himself.

Sighing, he opened the door.

"Oh god, I'm so sorry Harry! I didn't mean to walk in on you while you were naked! I thought you would be dressed by now! I—"

Harry quickly covered her mouth with his hand, keeping her from saying anymore.

"It's fine," Harry assured the girl once he knew she was listening. "Really, it was an accident. I'm not mad. Let's just... let's just put this behind us and pretend it never happened. Ok?"

Lisa, her face looking like a lit up neon sign, nodded so emphatically that she looked like one of those bauble head dolls. It would have been amusing if he weren't so embarrassed.

He took his hand from her mouth and tried to smile. He wasn't quite sure it came out right.

The walk down the hall was incredibly awkward. Neither could even look at each other. The few times they did, both would catch each other looking the others way, flush a bright shade of red, then look away again. By the time they reached the living room their faces were the brightest shade of red anyone had ever seen.

In an effort to focus on something other than how his best friend saw him naked, Harry took a look at the living room. It looked mostly the same as always, except for the tree that stood off to the side in a corner of the room. Sporting hundreds of lights and nearly twice as many ornaments, the Christmas tree was very beautiful and set a warm and comfortable mood.

It did very little to help.

Around the tree Harry counted two dozen presents. Most of them, he knew, were for Lisa. This was not something that really bothered him. These people had taken him in, but they were not really his family. That they actually bought him presents at all when his real family had never given him so much as a 'happy Christmas' was more than he could ever ask for.

As the two walked in they saw Mr. Crawft sitting on one of the leather chairs near the couch reading the morning newspaper. There was a cup of steaming coffee on the coffee table in front of him. He looked up when he saw the two come in and frowned.

"Lisa, what was all that yelling about?"

"Ah..." The young brunette tried to speak, but she, like Harry, seemed incapable of doing anything more than lighting up like the Christmas tree several feet away from them.

"She, uh, well..." Harry coughed into his hand several times and tried to clear his mind again. It didn't work as well as it usually did, but it did help. A little. "Let's just say she walked into an embarrassing situation and leave it at that."

Mr. Crawft's frown deepened. He opened his mouth to speak, but was beaten to the punch by his wife, who walked in from the kitchen.

"Breakfast is ready. Dear, can you—oh! Harry, Lisa, I hadn't realized you two were already here. Breakfast is ready, so I want all of you to come to the table."

Breakfast that morning was nothing like it usually was. Normally, Harry and Lisa would trade banter while they ate, or Lisa would talk Harry's ear off and he would just nod and agree with everything she said, but today, they were both silent.

Lisa's mother seemed to notice this immediately.

"Are you two alright?" she asked, "You're both being awfully quiet."

"We're fine," Harry replied quickly, maybe a little too quickly. Sitting beside him, Lisa nodded her head, once more doing her best bauble head impression.

"Really?" Ms. Crawft asked, not looking like she believed his words for a second. Thankfully, she did not press the subject, for now. Harry knew the woman well enough to know that she was most likely just biding her time, waiting for a chance for either him or Lisa—most likely Lisa—to drop their guard so she could learn what happened. Hopefully, she would not learn about it until long after Harry left. He didn't think he could stand the teasing she would give him.

Harry was glad that some form of normalcy managed to return by the time they started opening presents. It must have been the thought of gifts that caused Lisa to return to an almost normal state, but he wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth, and simply thanked whatever deity—karma he suspected—that was watching out for him.

Many of the presents Lisa got from her parents were all the normal things

a girl her age would usually get: clothes, posters of her favorite pop singers, some of the newer movies that came out, and some of the collectable dolls she liked for some reason. On the other hand, Lisa's mother had bought him several books he had yet to read, and a few martial arts movies featuring Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan.

"Is that all of them?" asked Lisa, looking around the Christmas tree with a small frown on her face. Harry smiled, he knew what she was looking for.

"No." She turned to him when he spoke. He could see her cheeks flush a bit. Truthfully, so did his. But he pushed on before they could both lose their nerve and look away. "It's not. There's one more present for you, but I wanted you to open it last. Wait here."

Harry went into his room and grabbed the package wrapped neatly in green and red wrapping paper. When he came back into the living room everyone was looking at him, Lisa with curiosity, her mother with a soft smile, and her father with a frown.

By now he'd managed to regain mastery over the flow of his blood, and was thankfully able to keep from blushing when he looked at Lisa and set the gift on her lap. She looked at the box curiously, then looked up at him with a question in her eyes. He smiled.

"Well, go on, open it."

Lisa opened the box much more slowly than she did the other ones, Anticipation etched onto her face clear as day. She wanted to know what her best friend had given her this time. Last year it had been a small, beautifully crafted music box that he found in an antique shop. She still had it sitting on her desk and had played it nearly every night since Harry left for school.

When she finally opened the box and took a look inside, her eyes widened significantly.

"This is..."

"The new Tiffany Princess dress you were looking at a while ago," Harry finished for her. She stared at him, her eyes wide. Sitting on the couch

her mother's eyes were also wide while her father looked at them all in confusion.

"Harry... I..."

Harry smiled at his friend's speechlessness.

"Why don't you try it on," He suggested. Lisa nodded, still unable to express herself properly, and quickly left the room to try on her new outfit.

"Harry." Lisa's mother eyed the boy carefully. "You really didn't have to get her that dress. It's very expensive."

"I know," Harry replied with a small shrug. "But I wanted to. The truth is, I found out a while ago that my parents were incredibly rich. The money I put into that bank account at HSBC Holdings where Mr. Crawft works isn't even a fourth of what I actually own." It wasn't even one-hundredth of what he owned. "I figured splurging a little bit wouldn't hurt. And besides," he added in a softer voice, "Lisa's my best friend. I can't think of anyone else I would rather spend my money on."

Mrs. Crawft's eyes softened and a pleased smile sprang to her lips. She seemed truly appreciative hearing him say such a thing, probably because he had never openly admitted it before. Meanwhile, Mr. Crawft frowned at him in a way that made Harry think the man was looking at him like he was some kind of bug to be stepped on.

A second later, Lisa walked back into the living room, garbed in her princess gown. Harry had to admit that the lighter shade of red complimented her pink cheeks nicely.

"So, what do you guys think?" asked Lisa, twirling around for them. Mrs. Crawft clapped lightly for her daughter while Mr. Crawft's frown simply grew more prominent.

"You look lovely," Lisa's mother complimented her daughter. Lisa beamed a smile her, then turned to Harry.

"Do you think I look good in this, Harry?" she asked, her cheeks darkening slightly. Harry smiled.

"You look beautiful," he complimented with a smile, "Just like a real princess."

The redness present soon spread to the rest of her face and down her neck. She tilted her head and looked at her feet.

"Do you... do you really mean that?" she asked lowly. Harry rolled his eyes.

"I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it."

"I know," she admitted, reaching out to grab her right arm with her left hand and rub it slowly. "It's just that... you've never really said anything like that before."

Harry closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. She was right. He knew she was right. The truth was Harry had never really paid Lisa many compliments. This was the first one.

How horrible was that? In the five years they had known each other, he had never once given her a real compliment. Lisa had never complained. She understood that was just how Harry was, and had never seemed to be bothered by it, but now that Harry was thinking in these terms, he couldn't help but feel awful.

"Not anymore."

"Harry?" Lisa blinked as Harry stood up and walked over to her. She blushed when he placed both hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eyes.

"You," he started in a tone that was so serious even Mr. Crawft looked surprised, "Are one of the most beautiful girls I know. That dress only enhances that which you already possess."

Lisa flushed, and at the same time small tears formed at the corner of her eyes. The brunette buried her face in Harry's chest and wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug, a hug that Harry reciprocated in full.

"Thank you," Lisa murmured, her voice only somewhat muffled by his

shirt.

"There's no need to thank me for stating the obvious," he told her, causing her to giggle. He smiled as the girl snuggled against him with a happy sigh, pleased that he was the cause for her happiness.

The tender moment between the two friends was rudely interrupted by the flash of a camera and the cooing of Mrs. Crawft, as well as the grinding of Mr. Crawft's teeth.

"Oh isn't this adorable!"

"Mum!"

Ok, I lied about how many chapters it would take to finish the holidays. I had been hoping to finish this in two, but when I started writing I kept on doing so, and when my chapter ended up going over 21,000 words without signs of stopping, I realized I needed to break it up.

Anyways, I hope this chapter was good. I was trying to show the personalities of some of some of Harry's friends, as well as Harry's shifting personality. I'm sure you've all noticed that Harry is very different than he was at the beginning of this story. He's more willing to show his emotions and is not as taciturn as he was before. I was hoping to properly show that while Harry is a mature, intelligent and ambition child, he is still a child, and just as malleable as any other child is.

Once again, if you have any questions, comments, critiques, or you wish to tell me this chapter was so awesome it made your head explode, please leave it in a review.

Granted, if your head has exploded from the sheer amount of awesome this chapter possessed, I'm not sure how you're going to write a review.

New Year Gala

New Year Gala

Harry Potter stood still as Andromeda Tonks walked a circle around him, keen eyes looking him over. The woman reminded him very much of a predator with her stalking gait. He couldn't help but feel slightly embarrassed, as well as frustrated, by the fact that she was not letting him go just yet.

"You dress up well," she complimented after several long moments, in which time she had done nothing but hum thoughtfully. "Those robes suit you quite nicely."

She was, of course, referring to the dress robes Harry wore. They were dark green in color, made of expensive acromantula silk that shimmered when the light hit it, and complimented his eyes nicely. The robes came in two layers: the long, inner-robe reached his calves, and the smaller half-cape draped over his shoulders. Several accoutrements adorned his robes, and on his left breast was the Coat of Arms for the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter with the family motto underneath.

Beneath his robes Harry wore black silk pants, expensive dragon-hide boots, and a black long-sleeved shirt. A small belt wrapped around his pants and attached to them was a wand holster used by most nobles, an extravagant holster made from dragon hide, with ornate gold patterns winding their way across the leathery material, the Potter Crest clearly visible on its side, and a single diamond encrusted at the bottom of the sheath, which contained the custom wand made for him by Ollivander. His mother's was still hidden in the holster strapped to his calf.

"Now if only we could do something about your hair..." Andromeda continued to mutter. She seemed to be talking more to herself than Harry.

In response to her words, he ran a hand through his hair, causing her to smile.

"Relax," she said soothingly. "You've taken all the training I've given you like a fish to water. You'll be fine... regardless of how messy your rat's nest is."

"I'm not nervous," Harry informed her quickly, a little too quickly.

Andromeda gave him a knowing smile while he grimaced.

"Alright," he confessed, "I'll admit to being a bit... anxious. This will be the first time I'm truly in the public eye, and it will be at a political gathering where many prominent members of the wizengamot and various lords will be attempting, many of whom I don't doubt will be trying to gain my allegiance, or use me for their own means. It doesn't help that all of them have decades of experience over me."

"That is true," Andromeda replied. "They have many years, decades even, of experience that you lack. Not to mention you are very young, too young to be entering the world of politics on your own."

"Not helping here."

"However," Andromeda continued, "you have proven to be a remarkably adept student. You've taken everything I've taught you and used it to your advantage. That deal you bade me to make with Nimbus Racing Brooms was very well-played."

Harry narrowed his eyes at her as he finally realized something.

"You didn't inform me the deal had gone through on purpose," he accused. Her smile grew bigger and only his talent in Occlumency kept him from scowling. "That's how Dumbledore found out, isn't it? Because you didn't want me knowing about it, you had them deliver the brooms to Dumbledore and they informed him of our deal."

"They would have had to go through Dumbledore anyway," Andromeda said dismissively. "There was no way around that. He is the headmaster, after all. Besides," her smile became devious, "I wanted to surprise you."

Harry once again thanked his Occlumency skills, as it helped him refrain from groaning. This woman was just as bad a prankster as the

Marauders had been!

"Well, it did help my reputation," Harry admitted begrudgingly. "But I still would have liked to have been informed before hand. It could have saved me a lot of hassle later on."

"You're just upset that it deviated from your plan." Andromeda seemed to be taking far too much amusement from this. "You should have realized by now, Harry, that no plan ever goes off without a hitch. Even the most well-crafted plans have a tendency to go awry. Just consider yourself lucky that this particular plan happened to help you, rather than hinder you."

"So that was supposed to be some kind of lesson on what happens when a monkey wrench is thrown into my plans, and that I shouldn't allow myself to grow complacent and assume everything will go according to my design?" asked Harry, his voice dry.

"I wouldn't put it into so many words, but..." Andromeda trailed off, that teasing smile still on her face. Harry sighed, knowing he had lost this round. It left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he consoled himself with the fact that she was a pureblood, and not just any pureblood, but a Black.

There was a reason the goblins had recommended her.

Harry straightened himself up as best he could.

"Well, I guess it's about time I get going."

Andromeda cast a tempus spell to see that he was right. It was time for him to leave.

"Looks like it. Come, I'll let you use my floo." Placing a surprisingly comforting hand on his shoulder, she led him out of her bedroom, where she had been letting him get dressed, and down the hall on the fourth floor of their house. Like Harry had expected, the Tonks family lived where they worked, with the second, third and fourth floors being their place of residence. The family bedrooms were located on the fourth floor, guest rooms on the third, and the dining and living rooms on the second.

The Tonks residence was rather homely, Harry had to admit. It was well-furnished with tasteful furniture. Most of the floor was made of cream carpeting, except for the kitchens and bathroom, which was composed of marble. The walls were a light beige and several gas lamps lit all the rooms, bathing the area in a warm glow. It looked like your typical household of a happy, decently wealthy family.

They walked down two flights of stairs to reach the living room, where he was immediately confronted by an excitable young woman about seven years older than Harry with bubblegum pink hair. The girl in question was quite pretty, with a dark twinkling eyes, a pale heart-shaped face, and short spiky purple hair that gave her what muggles referred to as the 'goth' look. Of course, she exuded an aura filled with so much excitement and giddiness that the term 'goth' could never be applied to her in any fashion.

Upon noticing that her mother and Harry were done getting ready, she stood up and made her way over to them—

"Watcher, Harr—OOF!"

—only to trip over... something—air most likely—and crash right into Harry.

With a loud cry of surprise the two took a tumble, Harry landing harshly on his back and the girl landing on his chest, which made him lose all of the oxygen he possessed and stunned him for several seconds.

"Dammit, Nymphadora!" Harry swore, something he rarely did, but felt this particular situation warranted it. Seriously, the girl wasn't even tripping over her own two feet, but seemed to be tripping on air. How this girl could be so clumsy was beyond him.

Unless, of course, she was not actually this clumsy and just did it to get a rise out of him. Which, now that he thought about it, was entirely possible. Tonks was just as devious as her mother and her currently indisposed uncle.

Maybe deviousness was a Black family trait.

Tonks glared at him from her place atop his chest, her hair going from bright pink to angry red.

"Don't call me Nymphadora!"

Nymphadora Tonks was the daughter of Ted and Andromeda. He met the girl when she'd been given a break from auror training and came to see her family. Harry had been there at the time, receiving lessons on pureblood etiquette from Andromeda. The girl had a rather bubbly personality, and despite being almost exact opposites, the two hit it off fairly well. It was just hard not to get along with her.

Of course, this was only when she wasn't falling on top of you. The girl had a clumsy streak a mile wide and couldn't walk five feet without tripping over something.

"Consider it your punishment for falling on top of me," Harry retorted. Tonks had the decency to look sheepish. "And can you please get off?"

"Right, sorry about that, Harry." Tonks quickly scrambled off the raven-haired boy and helped him up. Harry sighed as he dusted himself off and did what he could to straighten his now askew robes. Andromeda helped by waving her wand at him. Harry felt a brief surge of magic layering his clothing before all of it unwrinkled itself.

"Thank you," Harry told the older woman, who gifted him with a smile.

"You're welcome. Now, you should run along before you're late. Do you remember how to use the floo?"

"Throw floo powder into the fire place and yell out the name of the place I'm going to."

"Excellent. Good luck, Harry."

"Thank you."

Harry gave the woman a nod, said goodbye to Tonks, then grabbed some floo powder and threw it onto the fire place. The fire turned a light green as Harry stepped into it.

"Ministry Atrium!"

As the words left his lips, Harry started to regret speaking them. The world zoomed around him as nothing more than a blur. Streaks of indecipherable light consumed his vision, causing his eyes to dilate as they futilely attempted to keep up. He was speeding through the floo network like a bullet fired from a muggle sniper rifle. It was enough to make him nauseous.

Fortunately, the entire trip only lasted a total of five seconds. Unfortunately, due to his eidetic memory, those five seconds would be stuck inside of him mind for the rest of his life and cause him nausea to the end of his days. He could only hope that when dreamt of this event, he wouldn't wake up vomiting all over his sheets.

Another unfortunate event happened after the trip ended. Harry didn't know if it was due to the speed he was traveling, or if some other factor was involved, but the moment he reached his destination, Harry was literally shot out of the fire place to the Ministry of Magics Atrium like a muggle canon ball.

A loud bang echoed from the fireplace as Harry flew out of it and into the air. Reacting on nothing more than sheer instinct, the young boy fed magic into his hands and twisted his arms, using them as a propeller to twist and turn his body like a professional acrobat. He spun and flipped end over end in several corkscrews and, much like a cat, landed feet first on the ground.

Harry crouched down low, placing his left hand on the floor, fingers splayed to keep his balance. He took a moment to steady his breathing, as he still felt a little nauseous. After several deep breaths, he centered himself and stood up.

It was only after opening his eyes that he realized every single person in the entire Atrium was gawking him with wide eyes and even wider mouths. The crowd of people were so stunned to see someone getting launched out of the floo, they didn't even seem to recognize him. He supposed that was a good thing, at least.

Harry was also glad it was a holiday and most of the people were off

work. There were only about 50 people in the atrium all together. The fewer people who saw this incident the better.

Dusting soot off his robes and straightening them as best he could while promising to magic the newly acquired wrinkles out when he had a moment alone, Harry marched through the atrium, ignoring the shocked eyes blatantly staring at him. He didn't want to stick around when they finally realized Harry Potter had just walked by them. The sooner he was out of this place, the better.

The place Harry walked through, the Ministry atrium, was a long, magnificent hall with a dark wood floor that was polished to a shine, a peacock blue ceiling, and dark wood walls with many fireplaces set into them. On the ceiling, Harry immediately noticed the inlaid golden patterns moving about like a heavenly notice board. Runes. He didn't recognize many of them, but what few he did recognize allowed him to deduct what they were. He wondered what languages those other runes were in.

He passed under several large archways as his steady footsteps echoed through the atrium. On several sides he could see what looked like some kind of elevator leading to the surface. Harry knew that was where people entered the Ministry from the muggle world via telephone booths.

Along the way to the front desk, a large statue stood several meters away, its surface gleaming gold and presenting a magnificent contrast to the dark wood of the atrium. It was a fountain, he noted when he saw water spurting out of the statues. He could see five in total: a wizard, a witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house elf, all of which spouted water from various locales into the pool below. While it was a beautiful work of art, Harry wrinkled his nose in disgust when he saw that it was showing the non-human magical creatures basking in the human's generosity.

It was a statue of bigotry.

He soon stopped in front of the front desk. By now enough people had arrived after his small stunt that the crowd began moving again, though many people had begun chattering excitedly about his grand entrance. Thankfully, they were all too shocked to notice just *who* had given them such a display.

Seated at the desk was a wizard wearing peacock blue robes who looked like he didn't know which end of the razor was the one you shaved with. The man looked up as Harry approached, and he couldn't help but feel glad that his hair was currently in the way of his scar.

He looked directly in the man's eye and said, "I'm here for the Ministry Ball."

"Step over here," the wizard said in a board tone.

Harry walked a bit closer to the man who suddenly held up his hand.

"Invitation."

Harry blinked, then pulled the invitation from his robes and gave it to the man. The wizard's eyes scanned the contents of the letter, then promptly widened.

Harry sighed.

The wizard looked back up from the letter to him, then back at the letter, then at him again. Finally, his eyes landed on Harry's forehead, where his scar was just barely visible beneath the locks of messy black hair.

"I would rather not have you cause a scene, Prowell." Harry smiled when he saw the man's eyes widen. His name badge had his last name on, not his first. "So, it may be best if you pretend you never saw me." He paused, then added, "I'm sure the Minister would appreciate it if I were not delayed as well."

"Of-of course, Mr. Potter, sir," the man said in a nervous voice. He seemed to blank out for a second, as if trying to remember something, then held out his hand again. "I'll also need to see your wand. Don't worry," he added hastily upon seeing Harry frown, "it will be given right back. I just need to scan it."

After a moments consideration, Harry withdrew his wand from his belt holster and handed it to Prowell, who dropped the wand in a brass instrument that appeared reminiscent to a set of scales. It began to vibrate, and Harry noticed as a slip of parchment shot out of a slit at the

base. The wizard picked it up and read through it.

"Thirteen inches... strange," the man's brow furrowed, "It's not telling me what the core is made of."

"It's a dual core," Harry answered, causing the man's eyes to widen. "Heartstring of a Griffin dusted in powdered dragon scales."

"Ah, well, I'll just... take your word for it then," the man muttered as he impaled the strip of parchment on a tall brass spike. He then handed Harry the wand back. "And here you are, Mr. Potter, sir. Now, the Ministry ball is being held on the fourth floor. Just take the elevator and head straight to the fourth floor. It's the large set of double doors at the end of the hall. You can't miss it."

"Thank you." Harry gave the man a nod before walking through the gates in the direction the wizard had indicated. Once through the large golden gates, he walked through a set of smaller ones, where twenty lifts stood behind wrought golden grills.

Harry entered one of the many elevators and pressed the button for the fourth floor.

The elevator was quite cramped. Harry was stuck with four other people: a large man with more hair than he seemed to know what to do with, two witches who were bickering back and forth—gossip, Harry rolled his eyes—and another witch who simply stood there in rigid repose. He was thankful none of them looked at him on the way up.

He got out of the elevator the moment his floor was reached, quickly walking down halls every bit as posh as the Atrium he'd just vacated. At the end of the hall was a set of double doors with two auror guards standing on either side of the entrance.

Harry walked over to the guards and presented the one on his left with his invitation. The guard looked it over, his eyes widening, before looking back at Harry.

"I trust," Harry began, using the imperious tone one expected of a pureblood, "that there is no problem with my invitation?"

"Not at all, Mr. Potter," the guard breathed out, causing the other auror to look at him in shock. "Please, go on through."

They opened the doors for him and Harry gave each a nod.

"Thank you, gentlemen."

The ballroom appeared even more magnificent than the atrium. Glittering white marble floors decorated the surface, gleaming and shining as if freshly polished. The walls were likewise made of marble, white and glittering in the lights overhead, with large, ornately decorated Corinthian columns embedded halfway into them. Unlike the ceiling of the atrium, this one looked very similar to the one at Hogwarts—at least in that it depicted a night sky with thousands of twinkling stars. Harry could tell right away that it wasn't as detailed as the Great Hall's ceiling, in imagery or magic. This one simply looked like a painting with an animation charm. Within the center of the ballroom was a dance floor made of black marble that contrasted starkly with the rest of the room.

Within the ballroom were hundreds of witches and wizards gathered for the occasion, all of them dressed in exquisite gowns and expensive robes. They chattered amicably as they partook of beverage and food. A light and beautiful orchestral music played in the background.

Harry walked further into the room, head held high. He needed to present the image of a man who, though young and inexperienced, had the intelligence, charisma, and the drive to become great. It would not do to show any weakness here.

Remembering all of the etiquette driven into him by Andromeda, Harry seamlessly integrate himself into the party. He began to speak with many of the people present, weaving between political groups with the ease of someone whose mind was programmed to follow a specific set of protocols. He conversed with many different politically affiliated groups, learning of their beliefs, their thoughts, and their political aspirations.

It helped that he was Harry Potter. There wasn't a single person at the ball who wouldn't love to speak with the Boy-Who-Lived. In this instance, his title was a blessing rather than a curse.

He had to admit, if only to himself, that he was very glad Andromeda had given him a list of potential people who were likely to be present. He was equally glad for his eidetic memory. It was an incredible boon to his endeavors. With it, he recognized almost all of the people he spoke to, and knew quite a bit about each person thanks to Andromeda's footnotes. Out of the 156 people in attendance, he was pleased to say there were only ten that he did not know, and that was because they were not on Andromeda's files.

A large number of the people there were lords who held a seat on the Wizengamot. Many of them were decrepit old men whose time had long since past and were now clinging to the last vestiges of their power out of a stubborn refusal to step down. They were not just arrogant, but completely unable to change their ways. They were unbending in their beliefs, had no desire to change any of their laws for the sake of 'keeping tradition,' and it was of Harry opinion that they were the main reason the war against Voldemort had gone so horribly.

When the change he wanted to bring about came, they would be the first to go.

Of course, decrepit old men who had out-served their purpose were not the only people there. Harry met a number of interesting individuals and potential allies.

There was Howard Esslies, a lord of the Wizengamot who had a wife and two children. He was from a noble family and, thanks to his political aspirations as well as a deal made in 1983, had gained one of the empty slots on the Wizengamot thanks to the untimely death of one of its members.

Moving on he met a group of wizards: Jackson Ashworth, Adrison Smith, and Edward Colson. Each belonged to a noble house of neutral standing, fairly wealthy, and possessing useful several connections. They were also a group who had discovered a love of muggle deep sea fishing. Every month they gathered together and went out on a large ship to go fishing, leaving their wives at home to hold down the fort.

Others Harry met included Karrick Bansig, Ignos Callon, Darick Jeter,

Calliway Hallows, Gregory McCarth, and Aarin Falleeng. They were a decently powerful coalition on the Wizengamot. None of them really had any aspirations, but that could only benefit Harry in the long run. Without any real political desires, they would be more willing to follow him if he could give them an airtight reason to do so.

Emily Smith, a witch who worked at Saint Mungos, was another he met. While she did not have any political pull, she was a very important faculty member of the magical hospital, one of its heads, to be exact, which would explain her presence. She also possessed a keen intellect and could endlessly debate on any number of subjects centered around healing.

It was during one of these seemingly endless meetings that Harry found a person he had met before. He had been speaking with Howard and Elisia Cawfing, a husband and wife pair who were former unspeakables and now dabbled in spell creation as a hobby, when he spotted none other than Amelia Bones. Unlike many of the women attending, who wore the latest in wizarding fashion, she was outfitted in a set of robes that would not have looked any different from ordinary wizarding robes, were it not for the fact that they were clearly made from acromantula silk.

Smiling at the pair he had been discussing the magical theory behind spell creation with, he excused himself and, with a promise to write to them on their theory about the relativity of the fabrics of space and time, made his way over to the stern-looking woman with the monocle.

"Madam Bones," Harry greeted the woman who turned to him. She eyed him up and down, nodding approvingly, before sticking out her hand for him to shake. The woman acted nothing like most pureblood women. She hated standard etiquette protocols.

"Mr. Potter," she said, smiling a bit. "I did not expect to find you here. You dress well, though your hair is as untamable as ever."

"Unfortunately, nothing I do ever seems capable of taming this mess," Harry sighed in an exaggerated manner as he swept a hand through his bird's nest of hair. "And cutting it doesn't work either. It just grows back."

Madam Bones nodded her head, smiling in reminiscent.

"It's a Potter trait, or so I am led to believe. Both your father's and grandfather's hair was the same way."

"Well, it's good to know I'm not alone in my suffering," he said a tad dryly. The monocle wearing woman barked out a quick laugh before settling down and giving him a curious look.

"So just what are you doing here, Mr. Potter?"

"I got an invite and decided it would be the perfect opportunity to get my feet wet," Harry told her. When Madam Bones raised her left eyebrow, Harry realized his saying might not have been understood and quickly added, "this is one of the largest gatherings of powerful witches and wizards who hold great influence either in politics or their chosen fields of study. I would have been remiss not to at least see who I'll have to work with when I come of age."

"Ah," the woman eyed him in a more calculating manner than he had seen from her before. "You seem to have some big aspirations for one so young."

"It's never too early to start making friends," Harry retorted with a smile, causing the older woman to smirk.

"No, it isn't."

"How is Susan doing?" asked Harry, smoothly changing the subject away from his own reasons for being here. To be honest, he was truly curious to know how his friends were doing.

"She is doing quite well," Madam Bones told him. "Susan has been very happy since Christmas. I believe it has something to do with that bracelet you gave her. She hasn't taken it off since getting it."

Harry smiled when he heard this.

"I'm pleased to know my gift was so well received." He flushed for a moment, seemingly embarrassed, before admitting, "I wasn't quite sure what to get her as we never really spoke about material items she might like."

"And so you decided that the best way to a woman's heart was jewelery," Madam Bones seemed amused. "It seems you already have some experience on what females like to receive, Mr. Potter. That gift was very beautiful, and the enchantments on them were quite complex."

"I went to Madamo Amora to get the enchantments done."

"That would explain why they were so well done. She is one of the best enchantress' in Britain." She eyed him curiously for a moment. "She is also very expensive. Those enchantments must have cost quite a few galleons."

"You can't buy friendship," Harry replied smoothly. "However, you can show your appreciate to the people you are friends with by getting them something nice."

Amelia's smile grew more genuine at the boy's words. They continued speaking for a while, before they were interrupted by a man Harry had yet to meet, but was the whole reason he had been invited to the ball in the first place.

"Harry, my boy!"

Cornelius Fudge was very short and somewhat overweight man. He had rumpled gray hair and a number of age lines on his good-natured face. His outfit was most unusual, a pinstripe suit, scarlet tie, long black traveling cloak, pointed purple boots, and a lime green bowler hat. Harry also noticed the silver pocket watch dangling out of his left breast pocket.

With him was another man Harry had never met, but knew of very well thanks to Andromeda. Lucius Malfoy looked every bit the pureblood lord of an Noble House, dressed in a set of refined black robes with the Malfoy House Crest on the front. His flowing blond hair, long and straight and sparkling, made him look somewhat effeminate in Harry's opinion. As expected, the man wore an expression of condescension hidden behind a veil of compassion and understanding. Were it not for Harry's talent in observation and the fact that he knew what to look for, he would have missed it. Held in the man's left hand was a black cane with a silver snake head as the pommel. Harry knew a wand lay hidden inside of it.

Beside him stood a very beautiful woman who acted the definition of a proper pureblood female of high social standing. With her slim, elegant figure, pale blond hair, cold blue eyes, and a beautifully aristocratic face that possessed a cold disdain for anything she deemed as beneath her, Narcissa Malfoy presented the image of a beauty whose heart was colder than the frozen tundra. Her outfit, a dark black sleeveless dress robe that hugged the curves of her body made her look even more stunning, and the glittering diamond necklace she wore drew attention to the elegant curve of her neck.

"Minister Fudge," Harry greeted with a firm handshake. Out of the corner of his peripheral he caught Madam Bones' eyes. She tilted her head toward him and rolled her eyes at Fudge. He smiled, before focusing his attention back on the man enthusiastically shaking his hand. "I would very much like to thank you for the invite. This event you've hosted is most impressive."

"And I am glad you could come," Minister Fudge replied jovially, before seeming to notice the other presence Harry had been speaking with prior to his interruption. "Ah, Amelia. How are you doing this fine evening? I trust your niece is well?"

"I am fine, Minister Fudge," Madam Bones replied in a respectful tone, though Harry could sense a hint of condescension in her voice. It seemed she did not think very highly of her esteemed boss. "And Susan is doing very well, thank you. She is currently staying at a friend's house."

Harry deduced from her words that Susan was with Hannah. He also noticed she had not mentioned who her niece was with. His eyes trailed to Lucius and his wife. Minister Fudge either noticed this, or was just oblivious and acting as he always did.

Harry was betting on the latter.

"Harry, this is my good friend, Lucius Malfoy and his Wife, Narcissa Malfoy."

"Lord Malfoy," Harry intoned graciously and greeted him with a slight nod. Lesson number one. While it was important to show respect, it was just as important to not show too much and make the other feel empowered.

In other words, don't act like a brown nosing suck up. Be courteous, but strong. "I am pleased to make your acquainted. I've heard much about you from your son, Draco."

If Lucius noticed the way Harry had spoken his son's name with such familiarity, he didn't show it.

"Mr. Potter," he replied, his voice sounding like silk. "I have always wanted to meet the famous young man who defeated the Dark Lord." He eyed the boy for but a moment. "You look very much like your dearly departed father." The blond man bowed his head in what could almost be mistaken for regret. "It was a shame when he passed on."

lesson number two. False platitudes. It was always important to make the person you are talking to feel like you are sympathetic toward their position, even if you didn't care two wits about the other person. That was something Lucius seemed to know how to do very well. The man was good. Incredibly good. If Harry had not picked Andromeda's brain about this man, he would have never been able to tell that Lucius was lying through his teeth.

"Thank you," Harry replied, nodding. With a smooth turn of his head, he managed to find a nice way to change the subject.

"And you must be the lady Malfoy," Harry's greeting seemed to startle the woman. She kept her composure very well, but the tensing of her shoulders gave her away. Despite this, she replied with the graciousness one expected from a woman of her stature.

"Mr. Potter," she replied in a voice that was equal parts cold and demure, a unique talent that, while holding out her hand for Harry to kiss.

"I must admit," the young boy continued, giving her a winning smile, "I have heard many tales of your beauty, but few seem to do them any justice."

Lesson number three. Pay compliments. It was an important part of the posh tradition of the wizarding world, and flattered the person or persons you are speaking with, making them more susceptible to your words.

Her lips twitched, amused, and he smiled once more before turning back to Lucius Malfoy.

"You are a very lucky man, Lord Malfoy, to have such a stunning woman by your side."

Finally, emotions showed on the man. Not his face, that remained as impassively cool as ever, but his eyes could not hide the warmth they contained when he looked at his wife. It seemed this was not a loveless marriage. How interesting. Could this be a potential weakness then? A chink in the man's armor? Harry would have to find out later.

"I am indeed most fortunate," Lucius agreed. Beside him, Narcissa Malfoy smiled very slightly, before masking it just as quickly. Mutual interest then? How fascinating.

"I am wondering, Lord Malfoy," once again, Harry changed the subject, this time adopting a tone of innocent curiosity. "Your family name is a French name, is it not? I heard rumors that the Malfoy family still has some ties to their familial home."

Lesson number four. Passive insults. This was done for one of two purposes. The first was to let them know that you have potentially embarrassing or humiliating information over them, yet not let them know how much or how embarrassing. The second was a subtle reminder.

Harry's main reason was the reminder. Despite their wealth, the Malfoy family was neither Ancient nor Noble, as far as Britain was concerned. They were a new family who only established a name here during the late 1700s. The reason they had a seat on the Wizengamot was thanks to a deal Abraxus Malfoy, Lucius' father, made with Minister of Magic at that time, Faris Spavin, back in 1947. No one knew exactly what the deal was, only that it had given the Malfoy family a seat on the most prestigious body of Magical Britain's government.

Another reason Harry mentioned Lucius' ties to France was to subtly remind him of who had the higher position. Lucius Malfoy was rich, and had a seat on the Wizengamot, but Harry was a Potter, a family who was more than just Ancient and Most Noble, but a member of the Founding Five, one of the five families whose seat on the Wizengamot counted as

two votes, and whose pockets ran deeper than the Malfoys.

To his credit, Lucius' face didn't so much as twitch at the mention of his families ties to France. He was, just as Andromeda had said, a political shark, incredibly dangerous and sly.

"You are correct. My family is originally from France. However, my family has long since cut ties with those still living in that country." His words were to the point and vague, giving just enough to inform everyone that he had no loyalty to France, but not enough to explain why his family left. There were rumors of why, of course, but there were always rumors.

Harry inclined his head.

"Do forgive me if I was too forward," he said smoothly. "I was merely curious."

"Of course," Lucius replied easily. Harry had to give the man credit. His voice was like silk, caressing the eardrums in ways that would have soothed the ruffled feathers of an angry Hippogriff. "However, I would advice caution against curiosity in the future. Some people are not as personable as I am."

Lesson number five. Threats. Lucius seemed to be incredibly talented at this particular aspect. The way he spoke and the tone he used was modulated in such a way that, were it not for Harry knowing better, he would have believed the Malfoy family head was actually worried for him.

"Granted, you are still young. It is only natural to be curious at your age."

Ah, the age insult, the only one Lucius was capable of making toward him. Being the Boy-Who-Lived on top of the heir to a Founding Family had several distinct advantages. Lucius could not make very many digs about him for fear of insulting him too casually. It helped that almost nothing was known about him as a person, and only a fool would believe those books that had been written about him. Lucius Malfoy was certainly no fool.

"True, however, I believe it's important for the young to have an inquisitive mind," Harry replied with a charming smile. "There is an old

saying 'those who don't ask questions, never learn.' Though I will certainly take your words under advisement."

Lucius Malfoy and Harry Potter carefully eyed each other. A small legillimens probe entered the raven-haired boy's mind. He had been expecting it. While legillemency was a Ministry controlled magic, that didn't stop nobles from learning it, or using it when they felt it would benefit them.

Now Harry had two options. The first was to use his talents at Occlumency to push Lucius out of his mind. The second was to use his Occlumency to present false thoughts to the older man. Both had their advantages and disadvantages. If he revealed himself to be an Occlumens, it meant Lucius might not underestimate him in the future, which could mean the difference between victory and defeat in the political arena. On the other hand, Harry disliked people thinking him weak. It was a ghastly quandary he found himself in, where he was measuring his need to remain underestimated by his dislike of people underestimating him in the first place.

"Oh my, what a lovely gathering we have here."

Fortunately, before the probe could actually get to the point where Harry would need to make a decision, a voice broke their eyes apart.

A very familiar voice.

A voice that made him shudder with primal fear.

Turning around, Harry was greeted by the resplendent beauty of Celestina Zabini, Blaise's mother. The woman looked utterly bewitching in her dark red dress, with Swarovski crystals and beads traveling along the tapered length of the fitted gown. A deep V-cut added drama to the shimmering length of the fitted bodice that hugged Celestina's womanly curves as it flowed from the neckline down to the opening on her upper thigh, showing enough to make any hot-blooded male hot under the collar. The glimmer of crystals and beads were emphasized as it opened up to create a floor length train on the back, and the dark red color complimented her full, ruby red lips.

"My lady Zabini," Harry greeted with refinement and tact. Just because he had an ungodly fear of this woman, whose smile was that of a predator that just locked onto its prey, did not mean he had to show anything other than courteousness. "It's a pleasure to be in your company again. As always, you are utterly bewitching to the eyes."

Celestina Zabini's smile grew and her eyes danced with merriment as she looked at the young man.

"Such a flatterer," she purred, the sound sending shivers down Harry's spine. Thankfully, the woman understood propriety, and gracefully greeted the others with a smile. "Minister Fudge, Madam Bones, it's a pleasure to see you two are well." Fudge began flushing bright red as he stammered greetings toward the beautiful woman, while Amelia nodded tightly. She didn't seem to like the gorgeous witch very much. "And Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, it's an absolute delight to see you two again."

The reaction of the two Malfoys was perhaps the most interesting of the bunch. The hand on Lucius' cane tightened, and Narcissa's entire body seemed to have gone deathly stiff. Both reactions were small, almost negligible, and most people wouldn't have seen them.

Harry was not most people.

Their reaction to Celestina Zabini's entrance, while something most would never pick up on, was most telling to him. And it told him that these two did not like Celestina Zabini, something the other woman must have known, because her merry expression turned positively sinful.

This woman, he deduced. could prove to be a very valuable ally. He thanked god, Merlin, and the stars for making him befriend Blaise.

Now if only he could get over this unknown and primal fear of the woman, maybe he could work his charms.

"Harry," Celestina decided to forgo formalities with him. He was not sure if she wanted to rile him up, or show the others how 'close' they were. "I believe you have met my daughter, Celia?"

"I have indeed," Harry turned to the young woman accompanying Celestina. Celia looked every bit as stunning as her mother. Her asymmetrical dress conformed to her full figure and gorgeous curves in ways that were designed to tantalize and tease. The top waist bodice was covered in thousands of glittering beads that sparkled as the light hit them, and the strapless, sweetheart neckline with peaked edges showed off her slender shoulders and silky skin. The shutter pleated skirt of rich taffeta had a back Godet that flowed down from the asymmetrical waist line and opened up into a sweeping train at the back. She possessed very little make up, a hint of purple eyeshadow and ruby red lipstick. But then, she didn't really need much to begin with.

Harry swept the young woman's offered hand up in a kiss.

"I must admit, I have always believed beauty such as yours to be like lightning, never to strike twice in the same place. Seeing you and your mother here now, I understand I couldn't have been more mistaken."

Celia smiled, and Harry was very thankful the 18-year old girl had not yet mastered her mother's 'shark in the water' smile. It made dealing with her easier.

Though he did not like the way she seemed to be eying him like a piece of meat.

"You are as charming as I've been told, Harry," Celia's voice was light, airy, and much like her beauty, seemed to contain an otherworldly quality.

"Why don't you two become acquainted on the dance floor?" suggested Celestina with a smile and a glint in her eye.

And that was how Harry found himself dancing with Celia among the throng of people who had also decided to start dancing now that some of the major greetings and politicking was out of the way. Dancing at galas like this was an important tradition in wizarding society. Andromeda had deemed it lesson number six.

Times like these made Harry both glad and disgruntled that he had eidetic memory. On the one hand, he was able to easily listen to Celia as she spoke and reply to all of her words and questions. At the same time,

he really had no desire to hear about how her friend had been caught having sex with her boyfriend by her father. He really didn't want to remember that.

Thinking on Celia and her mother as he danced and conversed with girl in his arms, Harry couldn't quite figure them out. What was their angle? What were they hoping to accomplish? Why were they here? Everyone here had a clear goal, a defined set of ambitions or a desire to seem more important than they really were. Celestina, on the other hand, didn't seem to have any ambitions beyond amusing herself.

His thoughts were interrupted when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a familiar figure standing within the crowd.

The dance ended and Harry smiled at Celia, taking her right hand in both of his and placing a kiss upon it.

"It has been lovely dancing with you," he told her, causing her to smile. "However, I must beg my leave, at least for now. An important matter that I must see to has come to my attention."

"Oh?" Celia seemed disappointed. "I suppose I can let you go," she said, before smiling at him again. "But you owe me another dance."

"I would be honored to share another dance with you," Harry's reply made her smile widen. With the last pleasantries out of the way, he made his way off the dance floor, sighing in relief. He didn't know why, but being near that woman made him nervous.

Harry swerved between the crowds, swaying gracefully from side to side as he moved ever forward without bumping into anyone. It wasn't long until he was within reach of the person he had seen.

Nathaniel Greengrass was an imposing man. Tall, with short cropped blond hair and icy blue eyes that appeared dead, not cold like Daphne's, but completely and utterly lifeless, as if someone had sucked out the man's soul and all that remained was a shell that had yet to realize it was no longer living. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

The man was currently speaking to someone, an older man Harry

recognized from the profiles Andromeda had given him. He belonged to one of the darker families, though he had not given his allegiance to Voldemort during the war.

Harry waited for the conversation to finish and the man to walk off, before moving in to greet the Greengrass patriarch.

"Lord Greengrass." The man turned, then blinked, the only sign of surprise, as he saw Harry standing before him. His eyes traveled the younger man's length, studying him with keen, observant eyes, then looked at his forehead where he saw the boy's scar.

"Mr. Potter," he intoned, his voice as dead as his eyes.

"I have heard much about you, sir," Harry continued, "Your daughter has informed me that you are a member of the ICW."

"I am," Lord Greengrass' eyes went from Harry to Daphne, who stood beside her father with a look of cold disdain that would not be out of place on an adult pureblood witch.

Daphne Greengrass looked rather stunning in her dress, an asymmetrical satin mermaid construction that opened up to create a full circle of dancing satin on the skirt. The square neckline bodice featured a single shoulder strap accentuated by the addition of satin flowers that draped over her bust line. The asymmetrical shutter pleating swirls went from the neckline down over the hips and opened into diagonal deep pleats at the knees. The mermaid skirt flowed down with a rich fullness. Despite her young body not possessing the curves of say, Celestina and her daughter, Daphne really did look quite pretty.

He almost smiled when he noticed she was wearing the earrings he gave her.

"I hear the ICW has been debating on changing the international policies on..."

Harry soon found himself engaging Nathaniel Greengrass in a conversation about the many policies of the ICW and how they differed from the laws set by the British Ministry of Magic.

Throughout his conversation with her father, Daphne kept her eyes locked on Harry. Her face remained set in an expression of aloof coldness, but her eyes could not hide her feelings. He could see many things within those eyes: curiosity, wonder, confusion, and so many more emotions that it was hard to pinpoint them all.

After Harry had spoken with Nathaniel in what he deemed an appropriate amount of time to ensure he had gained the man's interest and respect, he got to the real reason he had come over in the first place.

"Lord Greengrass, I was wondering if you would allow me the honor of dancing with your daughter?"

Daphne tensed ever so slightly while Nathaniel looked at him. Harry couldn't be sure what the man was thinking, his face was so dead it was even harder to read the Lucius' veneer of disdainful politeness. After a few moments, however, he nodded.

"You may dance with my daughter, Mr. Potter."

"Thank you," Harry inclined his head respectfully, then turned to look at Daphne.

He held out his hand and, after but a moment, Daphne gently placed her hand within his. Together, the two walked onto the dance floor.

They faced each other, Harry's right hand locked with Daphne's left, left hand on her waist while her right settled itself against his shoulder. With their positions set, they began to dance.

"Po—Harry," Daphne corrected herself, causing Harry to raise an eyebrow. He looked at her curiously as she bit her lip. "I just... I wanted to thank you, for the gift," she added, realizing he had no clue what she was thanking him for. "It was very thoughtful of you."

"I'm pleased you like them." Harry smiled as he led his dance partner through the steps for this particular dance like a pro. Andromeda's teachings combined with his natural grace and athleticism proved very helpful in regards to dancing. Lisa would have been jealous at how quickly he picked the talent up while she had trained in dancing for years.

"You make them look good."

Daphne smiled slightly as she followed his lead with precision and grace. It was clear to Harry that she knew how to dance, and not just well. All of her movements were designed to make her partner look more graceful. Was this a result of her training?

"I have to admit," Harry began in a soft whisper in case there was anyone listening, "your father is a very frightening man."

Daphne's lips twitched into a smile before she regained control of herself.

"He is very intimidating," she said softly. "Many of the people he works with are afraid of him because of how emotionless he is."

"I don't think it's just that he's emotionless," Harry replied, "I think it has more to do with the fact that he looks—"

"Dead on the inside," Daphne finished for him. Harry's eyes softened as he saw a flicker of pain in the blond's icy blue orbs.

"Something like that," he said, before deciding a change of subject was necessary. "You look very lovely tonight," he smiled slightly, "more so than you usual, which is a surprise as I believed it impossible for anyone to look more stunning than you normally do." Harry, for perhaps the first time in his life, was actually glad Lisa had insisted on reading those trashy books of hers out loud. If nothing else, the variety of ways they had to compliment a female would be enough to last him a couple lifetimes.

Daphne smiled an almost imperceptible smile. Harry doubted anyone else would have noticed it.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." He paused as they were forced to stop speaking due to the dance. Harry picked Daphne up by the waist as she placed both hands on his shoulders, and spun her around before allowing her to land lightly on her feet. Their hands joined again, the dance continued, and Harry spoke once more. "You know, I'm very surprised to see you here. I

didn't think there would be anyone my age at this ball."

"That makes two of us then," Daphne said with a glint of amusement in her eyes. "I had not expected to find anyone my age here as well." She frowned, "As for why I am here, I believe my... father is trying to show me off to the parents of potential suitors."

Harry sucked in a sharp breath, but then blew it out just as quickly. He eyed her curiously, using his skills at Occlumency to keep a calm and analytical mind.

"What exactly do you mean by potential suitors?"

"My father is a very traditional man," Daphne explained, "more so than many others. While the common people of the wizarding world no longer use marriage contracts anymore, they are still very much in use by the nobility."

Harry nodded. He knew that much already. While he had not thought it important at the time, as he had no intention of getting married for a long while, Andromeda had been sure to pound the knowledge into his head. Now he was glad she had.

"However, with my father it's more than that. As the eldest daughter and heiress to the Greengrass family, it is up to me to carry on the family name. However, because I am a female, I can never become the true head of the family. While the Ministry of magic does not hold such prejudices anymore, pureblood society is still patriarchal in nature."

"Which means you have to marry and give birth to a male heir," Harry finished for her. Daphne nodded.

"Yes, but it's not as simple as that," she paused, her eyes glazing for a second before snapping into focus. "If I were to marry say, you, I would be forced to take on your name, making me Daphne Potter nee Greengrass. Any children I have would be given your name, and the Greengrass family would die out unless my father forced my sister into a marriage of his design."

Harry nodded in understanding, though he was now beginning to feel a

little lost. This was entering territory Andromeda had yet to cover.

A part of him also had to wonder about her words on her sister. What did she mean when she spoke about her father possibly forcing her sister into a marriage of his design if Daphne got married to someone like him? He hoped she would tell him on her own, as he did not want to indulge in his curiosity and inadvertently hurt her.

Daphne closed her eyes and her lips pursed. She looked pained. It was an expression Harry found he did not like on her.

"There are only two ways for my children to be given my birth name. I can marry someone from a branch family, like a second or third cousin to the Longbottom family. Because they are so far from the line of succession, they could agree to take my last name when they marry, making them the head of the Noble House of Greengrass, and any heirs I sire would be take the Greengrass name as well. This is what's normally done to keep a Noble House from dying out."

Harry narrowed his eyes as Daphne shuddered.

"And what's the other option?" he asked softly. Daphne closed her eyes, lips forming a thin line of displeasure at an obviously unpleasant thought.

"If not marrying a branch member, I can be married off as a second wife. This would allow me to keep my name and the heirs I sire would keep it as well."

"But you would be sold off like chattel," Harry murmured softly. Daphne nodded and he took a shuddering breath.

Harry knew that polygamy was practiced in the wizarding world. While the commonwealth didn't practice it, polygamous relationships were not all that unusual with the nobility. There were 66 members of the Wizengamot. Of those 66, 38 had a second wife. That was more than half. And of those 38, 15 also had a mistress. Harry even knew that one of the men, one of those decrepit fools Harry planned on getting rid of when he took his place on the Wizengamot, had a wife, a second wife, and two mistresses on the side.

And that was only going into those who had a seat on the Wizengamot. There were over 200 Noble Houses in magical Britain alone, and while Harry did not have the statistics, he was sure that a decent number of these families practiced polygamy in one form or another.

"He wants to sell you off as a second wife, doesn't he?" asked Harry, already knowing the answer before she gave him a nod. It was really the only scenario he could think of for bringing her here. There were no members of minor nobility at this party. Everyone at this ball stood at the top of the food chain; no 'branch family members' here.

"Yes," Daphne whispered, and though her voice showed no emotion, Harry thought he could detect a hint of anguish and disgust in it.

"How long has he been doing this?" Harry asked, his tone soft and his eyes searching. Daphne understood what he meant.

"This is the first time he's taken me to any form of political gathering," she informed him, "I believe he was waiting until I went to Hogwarts, where I would be able to start forming allegiances for him with the children of his associates, and make a lasting impression on those he hopes to marry me off to."

Harry closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they contained a determination that had not been there before. Daphne noticed this, and tilted her head inquisitively to the side.

"Would you hate me if I informed you about how much I long to break your father's jaw against my fist?" he asked innocently. Daphne blinked for a moment, surprised. It took her a few seconds to register his words, but when she did, she gave him one of her real smiles, which contained just a hint of amusement. Harry thought she had a rather pretty smile.

Perhaps it was because Harry wanted to protect that smile. Or maybe their talk by the Mirror of Erisad had given them a stronger connection than he initially thought, but as he and Daphne danced across the dance floor, Harry made a silent promise that he would not allow Daphne to be sold off into a marriage she did not want to be in, even if it meant bringing the entire Potter fortune and name down on Nathaniel Greengrass' head.

"No," she said, still smiling softly, "I don't think I would."

"Good."

XoX

Daphne Greengrass she nervously stood in her father's study. She hid it well, better than most, but she could not keep the chills that ran down her spine and threatened to overwhelm her Occlumency defenses at the thought of being in this room.

The night had gone well, extremely so. Almost too well. Her father had taken her to her first ever political gathering, where he hoped to show her off to potential suitors to begin receiving possible marriage contracts for her hand in order to elevate his status within the wizarding world.

Personally, she didn't know why. He already had a seat on the ICW, but perhaps that was reason enough. As a member of the International Confederation of Wizards, he could not gain a seat on the Wizengamot. If she were to marry someone who did have one, or would get one eventually, he would have influence in not only the largest body of magical government in the world, but the government of his home country as well.

She didn't know why he cared. He didn't seem to care about anything these days.

She had expected to stand by his side all night, while he spoke to aging fools who were sick enough to leer at an 11-year old girl like a piece of meat, and were willing to negotiate a bride price for her hand in marriage once she reached the age of majority. She would be able to do nothing about it, as her father began the process of selling her off like a cheap trinket. The thought sickened her, but she would bear it so that her sister would be able to marry who she wanted.

Then a miracle happened. Harry Potter appeared before her father. He spoke with a man most people were intimidated by without a hint of fear. He showed off his keen intellect and the vast array of knowledge he somehow managed to gather about the wizarding world in the short time he had been introduced to it. She suspected he had someone helping

him behind the scenes. He proved himself to be knowledgeable about what was happening within magical society at large, not just great Britain. More than that, he acted exactly as the heir of an Ancient and Most Noble family should.

And then he surprised her even more. He had asked her to dance, and her father had allowed it.

The dance had been a wonderful escape from her father's politicking, and allowed her a little bit of freedom she could not help but treasure. She and Harry spoke about a lot of issues away from her father's diligent eye. Daphne even felt comfortable and grateful enough to be honest with him when he asked her about her presence there. And he, in turn, proved capable of lightening her mood by poking fun at her father and the decrepit fools the man whose blood ran through her veins associated with.

In short, her night, while starting off terribly, with thoughts of being sold off like chattel, ended wonderfully as she danced with a boy who shared many similarities to herself. Perhaps that was why she felt so at ease with him, despite how little time they'd spent together.

However, the surprisingly happy night ended the moment she returned home. Her father had demanded she follow him to his study, and now she stood in front of him while he sat behind the desk, his dead, unfeeling eyes that intimidated and frightened men of great power piercing her like a spear.

"You neglected to mention that you were on good terms with Harry Potter," were the first words he said since they entered his study. Daphne knew she had to tread carefully when speaking. She had to be honest, but she could not afford to sound disrespectful. The consequences of such would be most unpleasant.

Daphne took a deep breath.

"You never asked me about any of the alliances I formed during my time at Hogwarts, otherwise I would have told you."

"Do not take that tone with me, girl," Nathaniel warned his own flesh and

blood. There was no change in his voice, but that just made it more frightening, and Daphne couldn't quite contain her shudder.

"My apologies, father," she murmured softly, bowing her head in deference. Nathaniel Greengrass leaned back in his seat.

"Tell me how you two came to be involved with each other. The newspapers stated that he is in Gryffindor."

She knew what he meant by that. He was not asking how they became a couple, because it was obvious they weren't, but how she and Harry had become... friends? Acquaintances? Close? Thinking on it, she wasn't 100 percent positive she even knew what their relationship was, but she knew what her father was asking.

"He is," she allowed as she carefully plotted out what to tell him. "However, he does not believe in house boundaries." Her father remained silent, and she took that as a sign to continue. "Already he has befriended people in each house, including Neville Longbottom, Lisa Turpin, Terry Boot, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbott, Tracey Davis, and Blaise Zabini."

She did not mention Hermione Granger, as her status as a muggleborn would not help Daphne win her father over.

Nathaniel's face remained unchanged, but he leaned forward in his seat to show interest.

"You mean the son of Celestina Zabini and the niece of the current Head of the DMLE?"

"Yes."

"I see." He leaned back in his seat and rubbed his jaw contemplatively. He looked back at his daughter and gestured for her to continue.

"I believe he is trying to build a power base in each house, though for what purpose I cannot say. Likely, he wants to build a network of friends and allies who will go into different professions and help him when he gets out of Hogwarts."

"Yes," Nathaniel murmured softly to himself, "The boy struck me as being quite ambitious..." Daphne remained silent as her father began thinking to himself. It was not wise to interrupt him when he got like this, or at all.

Eventually, the man returned to the present, and his eyes went back to her.

"I will allow you to continue seeing him," he declared, causing the blond pureblood's eyes to widen.

"What?"

She only realized her outburst a little too late. Her father glared at her for breaking posture and she quickly tried to cover herself by giving him a curtsy.

"Thank you, father."

Her father remained silent for a long while, and Daphne feared he might punish her for breaking the cold facade she was expected to wear at all times. Thankfully, he did not, instead dismissing her with a wave of his hand. Had it not been for her training, she would have breathed a sigh of relief. Instead, she curtsied once more, straightened, and left the room with graceful, measured steps.

It wasn't until she was in the sanctity of her own room that she allowed her jelly-like legs to give out on her. She slid to the floor, her back leaning against the door of her room, and began shaking like a leaf in the wind. Dealing with her father was always an ordeal, one she would not even wish on Draco Malfoy.

As she sat there, her mind couldn't help but wonder what he was playing at. Why was he allowing her to continue seeing Harry? Was he hoping to gain prestige by having his daughter become a close friend and confidant of the Boy-Who-Lived? Or perhaps he wanted to see if he could sell her off to Harry as his second wife? Both were very real possibilities. Harry's status as the Boy-Who-Lived combined with his status as the heir to one of the Founding Five made his status as a half-blood irrelevant. That he seemed to understand pureblood customs, was very intelligent, and well-informed about national and international policies made his blood status

even less important.

A part of her was actually very pleased that she would be allowed to continue speaking with Harry. He understood her in a way Tracey, Merlin bless her soul, never could. In a way nobody who had not suffered their hardships ever could. He did not look down on her, did not pity her. He respected her, *admired* her. For Daphne, who had never received the respect or admiration of anyone other than her sister, it was a heady and wonderful feeling.

And yet, as pleased as she was, another part of her was very much afraid. Nathaniel Greengrass never did anything that did not benefit himself, and he would never allow her to do anything if it did not benefit him in some way. She was afraid that he was using her as a means of getting close to Harry.

Daphne could only pray that whatever her father wanted, it would not hurt the boy she was coming to appreciate more quickly than she ever thought possible.

XoX

Harry arrived at the Crawft's residence late that night. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say very early the next day. It was nearing one o'clock in the morning now. He was glad Mrs. Crawft had seen fit to give him a key, as he had no desire to wake everyone by ringing the doorbell.

He entered the house silently, quickly making his way to the bathroom, where he brushed his teeth and washed his face. Once done, he walked into the kitchen for a glass of water before going to bed.

His walk was stopped, however, when he noticed a large lump on the couch. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that it was Lisa Crawft. She was lying in her back, sleeping, a blanket thrown over her. She held a pillow in her arms possessively, and had a small frown marring her face.

She must have fallen asleep waiting for him, Harry realized. All thoughts of getting some water left his mind as this knowledge filled his thoughts. He felt a strange flutter in his chest, a feeling he could not place and had

never felt before overflowing, casting a warm, radiant glow that suffused his body with joy.

Harry knelt by his friend, wondering what he should do and what this new feeling was. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, quite the contrary, but he didn't know how to classify it, and that bothered him. He also wasn't sure what to do about Lisa. Should he take her to her room? Leave her there? It didn't seem right to do either of those when she had stayed there because of him.

After a moments hesitation, he carefully lifted the covers, gently pressed the pressure points on Lisa's arms to make them relax her grip on the pillow so he could take it from her, then slipped under the blanket with her.

Lisa must have sensed his presence, because the moment he laid down, she inched closer until she was snuggled directly into his side. A soft sigh escaped her lips as she used his chest as a pillow, and very small smile lit her face.

Setting her arm down so it lay across his torso, Harry slipped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer, taking comfort in the familiar presence. Normally, he would have never done this, not in a million years. He had fallen asleep with Lisa before, but that was always because she had forced them to stay up so late they simply fell asleep on the couch. The few other times he slept with Lisa had been when she had crawled into his bed sometime during the night after waking from a nightmare, or so she said. This would be the first time Harry had willingly fallen asleep with her.

Harry closed his eyes and began the process of organizing and clearing his mind before going to bed. He got about halfway through before falling asleep. His last thoughts were on his time at the ball and the plight of his newest friend.

Ok, I lied about how many chapters it would take to finish the holidays. I had been hoping to finish this in two, but when I started writing I kept on doing so, and when my chapter ended up

going over 21,000 words without signs of stopping, I realized I needed to break it up.

Anyways, I hope this chapter was good. I was trying to show the personalities of some of some of Harry's friends, as well as Harry's shifting personality. I'm sure you've all noticed that Harry is very different than he was at the beginning of this story. He's more willing to show his emotions and is not as taciturn as he was before. I was hoping to properly show that while Harry is a mature, intelligent and ambition child, he is still a child, and just as malleable as any other child is.

Once again, if you have any questions, comments, critiques, or you wish to tell me this chapter was so awesome it made your head explode, please leave it in a review.

Granted, if your head has exploded from the sheer amount of awesome this chapter possessed, I'm not sure how you're going to write a review.

Jaguars, Griffins, and Dragons, oh my!

Jaguars, Griffins and Dragons, oh my!

I was running through a dense jungle. Large trees filled my vision, their branches twisting and turning and joining together to create a large network of interlocking branches that could only ever be created by mother nature. Many animals filled these branches, colorful birds hooted and cawed, brown-haired monkeys swung along the branches like, well, monkeys, and large snakes, boa constrictors several times thicker than the very branches they hung on, lazed about. The amount of noise these creature's generated pounded into my hypersensitive eardrums, though it did not bother me.

Humid air stuck to my fur, creating thick droplets of water that slid across my sleek body as my four pawed feet and powerful legs propelled me forward. Sometimes I would run along the ground. Other times I used the trees and branches to continue moving toward my destination. Leaping over large gaps to land on unused branches, using my sharp nails to stick to the surface of trees as I climbed up and down the trunks, ducking, swerving and weaving through vines and foliage, all of it was second nature to me.

My breath came out in thick, heavy pants, yet for I was not the least bit winded. It seemed that, for whatever reason, my capacity for taking in oxygen had expanded, and I could now intake much more air than I normal.

I paused in my trek through the jungle. Lifting my head I took several sniffs of the air. My nose, far more sensitive to smells than even the most well-trained dogs, picked up the scent I was looking for. It seemed I was on the right track.

My sharps claws unstuck themselves from the trunk I stood on and I landed on the ground with a soft thud. I bounded off once more, continuing ever onwards to my destination in long, loping strides.

Eventually, I reached my destination: a large pond being fed into by several streams. Reeds and grass stuck out from the water, swaying in the wind, along with the large humps of flesh from the hippopotamus lounging in the water.

There were many other animals present, mammals and reptiles, birds and bugs, very little escaped my keen eyes. I took note that many of the animals avoided me, but didn't pay them more than a cursory glance. They weren't worth my time right now, as I had no desire to hunt, not when there were more important things I needed.

Like water, for instance.

I finished my slow stalk toward the pond, stopping only when I reached the edge. Dipping my head toward the river, I made to take a drink when I paused.

My reflection stared back at me, its mirror-like quality distorted due to ripples on the waters surface. But even with my reflection blurred, I could still see my face. Glowing green irises set on a feline muzzle greeted me. The fur around my face and body was thick and black and shone with a glossy sheen, except for the center of my forehead, where a single patch of white fur stood out proudly in the shape of a lightning bolt.

My vision grew fuzzy, blurred. I blacked out for a second, and when my vision returned to me, the scene had changed.

No longer was I in a jungle, a mass of interweaving and connected branches and vines where thousands of animals live. Now I was soaring through the skies. Large white clouds hung around me, white vapors of water that coalesced into physical form. The air was crisp and cool, refreshing, and only the peaks of a mountain range several dozen kilometers below kept me company.

As I gazed upon the world around me, my eyes were inevitably drawn to the mountain peaks. I could not see anything below that. The thick cloud cover around the mountain range kept me from seeing the ground.

That was fine, I thought. My eyes were not focused on the ground far below, but the mountain peak closest to where I flew.

It was a strange flattop peak. There was no point at the top, and in fact, it looked less like the peak of a mountain and more like a valley. The peak dipped inwards, much like a volcano would, creating a deep valley within the mountain itself. With little more than a thought, my eyes zoomed in close and saw that the valley possessed a large, crystal blue lake surrounded by a copse of trees.

With a mild downward tilt of my wings, I descended into the small valley. The air whistled around me, shrill and loud as my descent came close to breaking the sound barrier. The wind before me parted as I focused my magic to the front of my body and used it to shield me from the effects. I could see small flames flickering at my magic as I reached terminal velocity.

And then I was at my destination. My dive took me to the lake, where I skimmed across its surface as I pulled out, my wings spreading to their fullest to slow my body while I used my magic to direct the flow of the air currents around me. The clawed talons of my front feet and the paws of my back feet skimmed across the water's surface, creating small waves in my wake.

As I flew along the surface of the lake, several animals that made this mountain their home came out to greet me. I recognized all of them, from the largest mammals to the smallest reptile, it was easy to recognize my subjects. And they recognized me as well, for when they saw me gliding along the lake, my powerful wings flapping only occasionally, they all bowed before me.

It was good to be king.

Looking down into the water I could see my distorted reflection upon its surface. It blurred due to the ripples, but nonetheless, I could see what all of my subjects saw. A glowing golden beak attached to a head of luminescent silvery feathers. Sharp, intelligent, and proud emerald colored irises. A pair of wings whose total span was easily twice as long as I was set into my shoulder blades, leading down into a pair of sharp, taloned feet. The silvery feathers became golden fur further down my body. Powerful hind legs and large paws with sharp claws were set into my hindquarter. And at the very end of my body, writhing and moving

along with a mind of its own, a poisonous green snake with red slitted irises stuck out its forked tongue and tasted the air with a sibilant hiss.

XoX

Christmas had come and gone, and before long, Harry found himself back in school. The beginning of the second semester had been very pleasant.

One of the main incidents about the end of the holidays that pleased him to know end was the newspapers article on his appearance at the New Year Ball hosted by the Ministry. It had been a very flattering piece about him. Apparently, several very prominent witches and wizards he had spoken with during the ball had been more than willing to praise his intelligence and drive, stating that he was 'a young man with a keen intellect who was both polite and driven.' Andromeda had been very proud when she saw the article.

News must have also spread to his peers, because many of them had begun staring at him again the moment he arrived at platform nine and three-quarters.

Something else he enjoyed about returning to Hogwarts was getting to spend time with his new friends. During the train ride over all of Harry's friends had given him presents in return for the ones he had given them during Christmas. In all honesty, he had not expected them to have gotten him anything, nor had asked them to. That they had done so caused his heart to constrict with some unknown emotion, a strange but not unpleasant feeling that he had only felt a few times before—often in the presence of Lisa.

Classes hadn't changed much. In fact, they hadn't changed at all. The course work was slightly different, the subjects being the next set of spells and theory the teacher's wanted to teach, but that was about it.

Transfiguration had finally moved on from changing a match stick to a needle to the switching spell.

"Many people tend to think that the switching spell is actually swapping out one item for another," Harry told Neville, Hermione, Susan and

Hannah as he showed them how to perform the spell by 'switching' an apple with a glass vial. Of course, they were not the only ones paying attention to his lecture; the other students and even Professor McGonagall listened in, curious to hear his explanation. "But the truth is you aren't actually swapping two things around. It wouldn't even be a Transfiguration spell if that were the case."

Harry paused for a moment, carefully considering how to explain his theory on the spell, then waved his wand and swapped the apple and vial again.

"What you're actually doing is simultaneous Transfiguration. Transforming the apple into the vial and the vial into the apple at the exact same time to get the effect of 'swapping two items around simultaneously.' This is much more difficult than transforming one item into another. Not only because you are transforming two objects at once, but because they must be done at the exact same time."

"Now the reason it's called the 'Switching Spell' is because of the method used to do the simultaneous transformations. Rather than actually imagining two objects in your mind transforming at the same time, you are picturing two objects in your mind trading places."

Harry tilted his head for a moment.

"I personally find that the easiest way to do this transformation is to picture each object on opposite sides of the other in your mind, then imagine them simultaneously moving until they cross paths and both objects end up on the opposite sides they started. The only problem that may occur here is when you have to visualize the two objects overlapping each other, which is where most of the errors you might make when casting this spell will occur."

"An excellent explanation, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall was practically beaming at him. Of course, beaming was very much an overstatement. She didn't beam. However, she did give him a smile, which might as well be beaming when it came to her "Very few people ever understand the particularities of this spell, even when they get older. Take ten points for Gryffindor."

Harry inclined his head in a gesture of acknowledgment toward the Transfiguration professor.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Classes ended that day with only Hermione Granger being able to accomplish the spell. The Switching Spell was much harder than changing a match stick into a needle. Even with Harry giving his peers whatever help he could, many still could not get the spell right. If the objects being 'swapped' didn't come out horribly disfigured, then the objects were entirely different than the ones Professor McGonagall asked them to swap in the first place. The only other person who came close to getting the spell right was Susan Bones, whose apple had a slight discoloration and the vial had several cracks in it.

"Remember," Professor McGonagall called out as the bell rang and everyone began to leave. "I want a six inch essay on the Switching Spell done by the next class."

"You guys go on ahead without me," Harry told his friends as he slung his book bag over his shoulder. "There's something I want to talk to Professor McGonagall about."

"Alright," Neville said, shrugging his book bag onto his shoulder. Hermione bit her lip, clearly curious as to what he intended to speak with Professor McGonagall about, but didn't say anything as the round-faced boy continued speaking. "We'll see you in a few."

"Bye Harry," Hannah gave him a cheerful smile while Susan's smile was much more demure in nature.

When they left, Harry turned to Professor McGonagall, the book she had given him coming out of his book bag as he walked over to her.

"I wanted to thank you for lending this to me," Harry said as he handed the book to the stern looking Professor. "It was very informative, incredibly so, in fact."

"I am glad you enjoyed it, Mister Potter." Professor McGonagall looked the book over, searching for any signs of damage. She looked up a

second later and smiled. "And it's in the same condition when I gave it to you."

"Of course," Harry replied, before smoothly changing the subject. "However, while the book contained a lot of information, it did leave me with a few questions."

Professor McGonagall raised an eyebrow.

"Such as?"

"The book often spoke of the process on becoming an animagus, namely how, through long hours of meditation the witch or wizard in question comes into contact with their animal form, often through the use of daydreams. I noticed, however, that the book only ever spoke of ones animal form in a singular tense, not plural. And I couldn't help but wonder if it was possible to have multiple animal forms."

The Transfiguration Professor looked intrigued by his question. A thoughtful expression crossed her face as she thought on how best to answer him.

"If such a thing were possible it has never been recorded," Professor McGonagall said at last. "Though that is not to say it *isn't* possible, just that we know of no one who has multiple animagus forms. I suppose, theoretically, it would be possible if the witch or wizard in question had two traits that were equal in prominence."

"That was my thought as well," Harry admitted. "The book spoke of how your animal form is connected to your base emotions. If someone is vain, or proud, or intelligent, or loyal your animal form will reflect that by being the animal whose emotions are closest to your most powerful emotional trait. So if someone had equal parts pride and cunning, they could theoretically have more than one form."

The stern witch looked impressed by his deduction, if the smile on her face was any indication.

She also didn't miss what he was hinting at when he mentioned pride and cunning.

"It seems, Mister Potter, that the traits of both your parents run quite strongly in you." She gave him a wry smile. "It is most disconcerting to see Lily's intelligence being combined with James' skills in Transfiguration."

"You should just be glad I didn't pick up my father's habit of pranking," Harry joked with a smile, "I've been told that he was quite the prankster in his youth."

"Yes, he was." Professor McGonagall grimaced, no doubt remembering all of the pranks Harry's father had pulled throughout his time at Hogwarts. "I can't tell you how pleased I am that you have not picked up his desire to cause trouble. And I should hope that you will not pick it up either."

She gave him a stern look that caused him to shrug.

"I don't think you will need to worry about that."

"Good," Professor McGonagall nodded and plastered a more pleasant look on her face. "Now, was there anything else you wanted to ask?"

"Just one more question," Harry replied, "I was wondering about the transformations themselves. According to the book and other books I've read, there have been animals of all kinds. Everything from falcons to polar bears to snakes and lizards, yet, in all those listings of animal forms, I have never heard of someone getting the form of a magical animal, like a Phoenix or a Griffin. I was just wondering if such a thing were possible."

The Transfiguration Professor rubbed her jaw, thinking hard on his question.

"That, too, is unknown, however," she paused, looking a bit pensive. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"However?"

"Well, there was a rumor of someone who had a magical animagus form," Professor McGonagall admitted with a shrug. "There are several

legends that speak of Merlin having the animagus form of a dragon, however, no one has ever found out if that is true, because no one has ever seen him transform—at least none that survived to tell about it."

"Do you believe there is any truth to the legends?" asked Harry.

"I do not know." Professor McGonagall shrugged. "However, I would hazard a guess that this is simply a case of myth. Morgana Le Fey was well-known as Merlin's greatest rival in magic. From my understanding, the two of them tried outdoing each other all throughout their time at Hogwarts, and continued long after they graduated. If anyone had any knowledge of Merlin's animagus form, it would have been her, and since she did not say anything in her book..."

Harry nodded, though on the inside he did have to wonder if perhaps Morgana had simply left the information out for some reason. It was hard to tell, as he had not known either Merlin or Morgana, but it was not impossible that she had decided not to reveal Merlin's secret out of respect for her rival. From what he read in her book, Morgana was a vain and prideful witch, but also held great respect for those who earned it. Several times she had written anecdotes that were often mocking and derisive when she wrote of other people. However, when she spoke of Merlin, while the quality held a similar mocking tone, there was also a hint of respect for his accomplishments.

Strangely enough, despite the book being about animagus, when it spoke of Merlin, there was not a hint of what his form might be, or if he had one at all. Which, of course, is what led Harry to believe Morgana had just decided not to tell anyone.

"Thank you for indulging me, Professor," Harry said at last.

"It was no trouble at all, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "If you have anymore questions, please feel free to come to me."

Harry offered the woman a genuine smile.

"I will most certainly take you up on that offer."

XoX

Harry read through several lines of writing that told how to make the Wiggensweld Potion, as well as what it was used for. The writing was in very neat, beautiful cursive that spoke of someone who had practiced her hand writing for years. Harry would even admit to feeling envious, as the calligraphy was even better than his own.

Sitting beside him, Daphne Greengrass, her hands in her lap, she eyed him while he read over her work. The only signs that she was nervous being the way the pointer finger of her left hand would occasionally twitch. The blond pureblood was still not used to having any friends besides Tracey and Blaise, and certainly not someone so willing to help her in one of the only subjects she was not good in.

It was Saturday morning, and as per the usual, Harry and his friends sat in the library doing their homework, or having their work revised to make it better. Sitting on his left, Susan Bones worked on revising her essay on the Switching Charm, which she had mastered just yesterday with Harry's help. Beside her, Neville and Terry worked on their Astronomy and Charms homework respectively. Blaise was being helped with his Transfigurations essay by Hermione, and Hannah and Tracey were diligently working on their respective essays for Herbology.

Well, Tracey was mostly complaining about how much work they had, but at least she was still doing the work.

Harry was pleased to note that all of his friends were wearing the presents he bought for them, except Neville and Hermione, who got several rare saplings and a copy of his personal notebook filled with theories and modifications on all of the first year spells respectively. Blaise wore the expensive Rolex watch Harry bought, Hannah and Susan were wearing their anklet and bracelet respectively, and Daphne had the snake earrings in her ears.

Not much had happened since school started, the most exciting event being the Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff game. It had been a hard fought match, much harder than when they had faced off against Slytherin. The Hufflepuff team had already seen Harry in action, and had decided that the best way to keep Gryffindor from winning was to keep him occupied.

It hadn't helped that Snape had been the referee during the game. He may have stopped being mean to Harry, but he still seemed to hate Gryffindor as a whole. The man had tried to do everything in his power to keep them from winning, including calling fouls on them even when they had not fouled.

Thankfully, Harry had gotten a lucky break and, despite outside interference from Hufflepuff, managed to claim the Snitch before his team was far enough behind in points that it wouldn't have mattered if he caught the Snitch or not. As things stood, they barely scraped out a win of 150 to 130 points.

"This is a good start," Harry told Daphne after he finished reading the essay, "but you may want to add more detail when describing the brewing process. For example, the heating process between each time you add Salamander Blood to the potion is done because Salamander Blood is an extremely viscous fluid, and if you add too much too soon, without using the heat to let the blood fully mix into your brew, it will turn into a disgusting goop that could permanently damage your cauldron."

"So you're saying I should write about why the process is important?" asked Daphne, drawing her left hand up to take a strand of blond hair that wiggled itself loose from the ponytail she kept it in and tuck it behind her ear.

"Yes," Harry answered simply, "Many people don't know it, but Professor Snape is a stickler for the 'whys' and 'hows' when it comes to brewing potions. Adding just enough detail to describe something, but not informing him why will get you an A since you're in Slytherin, but if you want an O then it would be better to add more theory to your instructions."

Daphne nodded, looked at her paper, and sighed.

"It looks like I'm going to have to write smaller," she cast a glance at Harry and gave him a tiny smile, "Thank you."

Harry smiled back.

"You're welcome."

"I'm beginning to think you have plans on stealing my best friend from me, Harry," Tracey's voice brought the two's attention away from each other. They turned to see the brunette smirking at them, arms crossed over her chest. "Should I be concerned or jealous?"

Daphne rolled her eyes at her friend while Harry smiled.

"Both, definitely both." Harry gave the brunette Slytherin a blindingly brilliant smile. "After all, I am, what was it you said? Oh yes." He snapped his fingers, as if just now remembering something. "'The most awesome person since ever' I believe were your words. Naturally, being the most awesome person since ever means Daphne is bound to like me more than you."

Tracey Davis gaped at her raven-haired friend as her words on the train were thrown back at her. That had actually been the first thing she said upon seeing Harry. No doubt she was beginning to regret those words.

Several of their friends began snickering at her expense, causing her face to take on a tinge of pink. She tried casting a glare at Harry, but it wasn't very effective.

"I take every good thing I said about you back," Tracey mumbled lowly, "you're just a prat."

Harry just smiled at her.

"Sticks and stones, Trace. Sticks and stones."

While Tracey pouted at him, and Daphne began picking on her best friend—much to said best friend's consternation—Harry decided to have a look around the library. As surprising as it may have seemed, he had yet to actually see what books the Hogwarts library had to offer, as he'd brought a number of books from home, and the book Professor McGonagall gave him had taken up a large portion of his time. And that said nothing about the amount of time and effort he'd put into practicing his combat spell work and Transfiguration.

While wandering down the isles, Harry ran into someone he had never in a million years expected to see in a library.

"Hagrid?" Harry blinked several times in surprise as the giant of a man nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Arry!" Hagrid nearly shouted in surprise, earning a stern glare from Madam Pince. The giant didn't even seem to register the irate look, instead focusing on Harry. "What are ye doing here?"

"Homework with my friends," Harry replied, somewhat amused by how nervous the man seemed. He wondered why. "And what about you? I don't think I've ever seen you in the library before."

"Ah, oh," Hagrid's expression was that of a child who just had his hand caught in a cookie jar. A very large child with a thick beard and hands large enough to crush an actual child. "You know, jus' gettin' some readin' material for meself. Anyways, I'd better be going now. Ye be sure to come visit me when ye can, ye hear?"

Harry frowned as he watched the man quickly walk away. That had been a surprisingly strange and suspicious meeting, and not just because Harry had been under the impression that Hagrid wasn't much of a reader. Perhaps that had been a common misconception on his part, but considering he had never seen the half-giant in the library before, his theory held credence. Still, he couldn't help but wonder what Hagrid, who had never shown an interest in books before now, could possibly want with a book on raising dragons.

XoX

Sunday was a day off for many people, including Harry Potter, on most occasions. Such was not the case this day. Today Harry decided to use this time to visit Hagrid and get some answers. He had done some snooping, and discovered something that made him believe Hagrid might know about the Cerberus and whatever it was guarding.

It was early in the morning; the sun had risen, but only enough for the morning light to reflect off the dewy grass and the Black Lake. Everyone else was still most likely asleep, except for Hagrid, who Harry knew from his observations rose with the morning sun. Another surprise, considering he would not have expected the giant of a man to be an early bird, but then, Hagrid was the gate keeper, so it made sense.

The wet grass crunched under Harry's feet as he walked toward the small hut belonging to Hagrid. It was a tiny little thing, round, and composed mostly of wood and plaster with a thatched roof. It was far smaller than what someone Hagrid's size should have been living in, but he supposed that, in a way, it suited Hagrid. The man did not strike Harry as the type to enjoy frivolities, but more the kind of man who liked living a simple life.

Stopping in front of the door, Harry waited for a moment before knocking exactly three times. The sound of barking immediately reached his ears, along with shouts of, "Back! Back Fang!" and the scuffling of someone moving around the hut toward the door.

The door opened and Hagrid's giant frame appeared within the doorway. The massive man blinked several times before looking down to see Harry.

"arry!" the man cried, seemingly pleased to see him. "What are ye doin' here so early in the mornin'?"

"I've always had too much energy to stay awake for longer than a few hours every night," Harry replied easily. "I usually wake up around this time, and I figured that, if your offer of visiting was still available, I would come to see you."

"O' course it is," Hagrid informed him happily. He moved out of the way, allowing Harry to enter. "Come on in, yer just in time fer tea."

Harry nodded and walked into the strangely stifling hut. The moment he did, he was assaulted, for lack of a better term, by a large, gray-haired boarhound. The enormous dog, almost a three feet larger than Harry was tall and easily three times as heavy, jumped on the young man and began licking his face. The emerald-eyed boy had to reinforce his arms and legs just keep the overly-enthusiastic dog from squashing him.

"Get back ye mangy mutt," Hagrid told the dog affectionately as he pulled it off Harry. "Sorry 'bout that. We don't get many visitors here."

"It's fine," Harry said, using his wand to cast a cleaning charm on his now wet face and clothes. "I like dogs." It wasn't strictly true, but it wasn't a lie

either. He was impartial to all animals at best, but there were a few of animals various species that he did like. It was more a matter of the animal itself, not what kind they were. Though he would admit to being partial to all forms of snakes.

"Well, it looks like he's taken a likin' to ye as well." Hagrid looked very pleased to see someone who appreciated his pet. The large man moved about the small hut, heading toward the back where Harry could see a large pot and a tea kettle boiling over the fireplace, which had a strange black ball in it. "Tea?"

"Yes please," was the instinctual response.

Harry sat down and was again accosted by Fang, though this time the dog did not jump on him, but rather placed its head in his lap. Harry pet the large dog on its head.

He frowned as Hagrid came back bearing two large mugs of steaming liquid. Maybe this was the normal temperature, but it was incredibly hot inside of the hut. Harry didn't think this was a natural heat.

Harry raised an eyebrow at the size of the drinks as one was set in front of him, but did not say anything as he lightly blew on the steaming liquid. It would make sense that someone with giants blood would only have larger than average dishes.

"So what can I do fer ye?" asked Hagrid as Harry gingerly sipped his tea. It wasn't bad, though it wasn't good either. Kind of bland. Still, for the sake of being polite, he sipped the tea quietly.

"I've heard that you have a fascination with animals," Harry said by way of introducing his topic of conversation. "I must admit to being a bit curious myself. Ever since I found out about the magical world, I've been wondering what kind of animals exist in it."

Hagrid's expression became almost child like in its glee. Harry guessed he was happy there was someone else who had his love of animals.

"Oh, there are tons of different creatures," Hagrid said happily. "There's the Thestrals that pull the carriages, different kinds o' dragons, large

acromantula, fire slugs," as Hagrid listed off the many creatures in the magical world, Harry noted that almost all of them, with the exception of Thestrals, sounded very dangerous. "And o' course, there's the Cerberus like me Fluffy."

"Fluffy?" Harry blinked, once, twice, thrice. "You mean to tell me the Cerberus guarding the third floor corridor is called Fluffy?" Who in the good graces of this world would possibly think of giving a dangerous three-headed dog that looked like it would sooner bite your head off a harmless and cutely cliché'd name like Fluffy?

Hagrid, obviously.

"O' Course," Hagrid didn't seem to realize that Harry knew that his dog was on the third floor corridor yet. He must have been too excited talking about his pet to notice. "I've had him since he was a pup! Named him meself. I lent him to Dumbledore to protect the... the..." Hagrid trailed off, his face scrunching up as he finally realized something. "How did ye know about Fluffy?"

"Found him while I was exploring the castle," Harry replied smoothly. "So you lent Fluffy to Dumbledore in order to protect whatever he has hidden under that trap door then?"

"Now, Harry," Hagrid said warningly, "You'd best be forgettin' about anything to do with that floor. What's down there is nothin' ter do with ye. That's between Professor Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel!"

Now there was a name that got Harry's attention. He first spotted the name on the card of Albus Dumbledore he had gotten during his first time on the Hogwarts Express. The card had mentioned that he had worked on alchemy with Nicholas Flamel.

After seeing the name on the card, one of the first things Harry did outside of self-study was look up the name Flamel. He had not found it in any of the previous books he'd read on important people in the wizarding world, thus had come to the conclusion that, whoever this Flamel was, must have been written about in books that happened further into the past.

And he had been right, only, the name Flamel had appeared much farther into the past than he expected.

Nicholas Flamel was the magical world's most famous alchemist and, at one point, had apprenticed Albus Dumbledore in alchemy. However, that was not his most remarkable accomplishment. No, what made Flamel so famous was his creation of the Philosopher's Stone, the famed alchemy stone that even muggle legends spoke of. Capable of turning metal into gold and producing the Elixir of Life, the Philosopher's Stone was one of the most powerful magical artifacts in the world, and had kept Nicholas Flamel and his wife alive for well over six centuries.

It was no wonder someone was trying to get past the Cerberus. If what Harry now suspected was true, then Hogwarts was currently housing a magical artifact powerful enough to grant immortality to the one who acquired it.

Harry's thoughts became distracted when he realized how truly sweltering the inside of the hut was. Sweat glided down his neck in thick rivulets, staining the neckline of his clothing. He could feel the fabric of his shirt and pants sticking to his frame. His entire body felt like it was covered in a layer of sweat.

"Hey, Hagrid." Harry frowned as he pulled at his collar in the hopes it would air out his shirt. Sadly, it didn't seem to do much if anything. "Would you mind opening the windows or something? It's stifling in here."

"Can't, Harry, sorry," Hagrid spoke up, looking over at the fire. Harry frowned, then looked over at the fire to see if he had missed something. It was rare, but not impossible.

"Hagrid," he started, mind stilling as he glanced at the fire. He rubbed his eyes to see if he was imagining things, then looked again. Nope, not imagining things. Sitting underneath the kettle was a large, shiny black sphere. "Is that a dragon's egg?"

"Erm... maybe."

Well, that settled it. At least now Harry knew why the man had been so keen on getting books on raising dragons.

"And just how did you get a dragon's egg?" asked Harry, his left eyebrow raised questioningly. "I can't imagine a dragon's egg is cheap."

"Won it," said Hagrid. "Las' night. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"And just what are you planning on doing with a dragon?"

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin'," said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library—Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit—it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on I em, see, an' when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here—how ter recognize diff'rent eggs—what I got there's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

Hagrid looked incredibly pleased with himself. Harry was beginning to think this giant of a man was a few cards short of a deck. While the thought of raising a dragon was intriguing, Harry would admit, there were several reasons why doing so wasn't a good idea.

The fact that raising a dragon was illegal and would earn you a trip to Azkaban, for starters.

Harry frowned while Hagrid went over to the fireplace to stoke the fire, humming merrily as he worked, his mind currently on two problems.

First was the Philosopher's Stone. There were so many unknowns about the stone that Harry wasn't sure what to do about it. He had already come to the conclusion that the Stone had been the object that had been taken out of Gringotts hours before the vault it had been in was broken into. He also determined that if Hagrid had given Fluffy to Dumbledore to protect the Stone, it stood to reason that the other teacher's had also placed their own protections around it. Who knew how many enchantments were guarding the Stone now.

Yet, there was much he didn't know about the Stone. What were the enchantments protecting it? Who was after the Stone? Did they know about the enchantments guarding it? Questions without answers was

what he had, and it was a serious problem if he wanted to find some way to use this information to his advantage.

Harry glanced over at Hagrid, the reason for his second problem. That being just what the hell was he supposed to do with the fact that the man planned on illegally raising a dragon at Hogwarts?

XoX

"Are you alright, Neville?" asked Hermione in obvious worry as she, Harry and Neville walked down the hall toward breakfast. The reason she looked so worried was undoubtedly due to the way the Longbottom heir kept rubbing his shoulders and wincing with every step he took. And how he was limping. It may also have had something to do with the pained grimace on his face.

"Well," he replied slowly, hissing as his leg jolted with pain. "I'm not dead on my feet." He sent a mild glare Harry's way. Said boy just smiled at him, causing him to grimace. "That's something at least."

"Then why do you look like you're in pain?" asked Hermione. Neville opened his mouth to answer, but Harry beat him to it.

"We've restarted his physical training schedule," Harry replied cheerfully. Was this what Master Wei felt every time he finished beating the crap out of him? What a wonderfully euphoric feeling.

"I realized during our first session that I was going about helping Neville get in shape the wrong way," Harry continued, his voice a mixture between his 'lecture' voice and a giddy tone that just sounded wrong. Harry never acted giddy. "You see, when we first started, I had him doing the same routine I was doing. I didn't really think about it at first, but after seeing how he looked like about ready to drown in porridge afterward, I realized that his body couldn't handle exercising like mine. I've been exercising for a little over six years now, and he's just started."

Harry had made a mistake when he allowed Neville to do the same workout he did. It wasn't something he really thought about at the time, maybe because Harry wasn't used to being with males who *didn't* do the same routine he did. Truth be told, the only guys he hung out with before

coming to Hogwarts were the ones he sparred with or played football with, and they all exercised regularly.

He had had other reasons for letting the boy do a harder work out than normal, though. It let him see where Neville's limitations lie. It let him know how far Neville could go and how hard he needed to be pushed to reach and break those limitations.

Granted, he still should have given the poor boy an easier routine, but what's done is done.

Neville sent Harry another glare, but it was ineffective because he wasn't even paying attention.

"So I decided to start by going back and having Neville do the basics."

"The basics?" Hermione raised an eyebrow when Neville shuddered. "And what are 'the basics?'" You could practically hear the quotations in her voice.

Harry's smile greatly disturbed Hermione.

"Stretches."

It was just a word. One, single word. But somehow, the way Harry said it made it sound like the most terrible experience in existence. It didn't help in the least when Neville shuddered.

Hermione shuddered as well.

They entered the Great Hall. Lisa and Terry were already there, and the group made their way over to their friends and sat down. Soon after, Daphne, Blaise and a still half asleep Tracey joined them. Daphne somehow managed to slip herself into a seat between Harry and Hermione, the latter of whom seemed to move over to make more room for the blond pureblood as an almost unconscious gesture. It was only *after* the bushy-haired girl looked at Daphne that she seemed realize what happened and looked surprised.

Harry had to admit, he was impressed. The way Daphne had been able

to make Hermione move over with her presence alone was nothing short of extraordinary. It probably had something to do with her training, something along the lines of projecting her presence onto others, perhaps. He wondered if the ability was magical in nature, or just her.

"Gu... I really haaaaaatteeee having to wake up this early," Tracey let out a loud yawn at the word hate, elongating her vowels for several seconds before ending her speech by smacking her dry lips.

"As I said," Daphne stated in a dry tone, "lazy."

Tracey sent her friend a glare, but was far too tired to argue. Instead she just began dishing up her food and started to eat moodily.

A few minutes later, Hannah and Susan came in, both of them sitting on the side opposite of Harry, next to Blaise and Tracey.

As breakfast continued, Harry felt Hedwig coming into the Great Hall seconds before she actually entered. He looked up to see the snowy owl swoop down, a letter clutched in her left talons. The beautiful bird dropped his letter right in front of him without hesitation, then immediately went for a strip of bacon.

Harry gave his partner an amused look.

"You really are a glutton, Hedwig. You know that?"

In response, Hedwig tried to bite his finger, but he quickly pulled it back. The bird's chest feathers puffed up angrily as she glared at him. Harry rolled his eyes.

"Oh, don't deny it," he teased her, "I only speak the truth. How could I say anything else when the first thing you do upon entering is go after my bacon."

This time, Hedwig rolled her eyes and gave him a hoot.

"Fine, so it's Daphne's bacon, not mine." He gazed at the blond pureblood to see her giving him an amused look. Her face hadn't changed at all, but her eyes told him how amused she was by their

antics.

Harry decided he didn't like the way she eyed him. He was sure she was going to say something sarcastic, so he turned back to look at Hedwig.

"And that just makes it worse. You're taking something that doesn't belong to us. It's quite rude, taking something without asking first."

"I don't mind," Daphne replied, her tone just as dry as always. Harry thought he saw the hint of a smile on her luke-warm face. "Hedwig deserves something for all the work you make her do anyway. She's probably exhausted flying all over the country delivering letters."

"Oh, ha ha," Harry grumbled sarcastically. "Who knew you had such a sharp wit," he teased, smiling at her. Daphne rolled her eyes. "In either event, half of the time she decides to fly letters for me, it's because she chased off the owls who sent me letters so I couldn't use them."

"I did notice that she sometimes has blood on her talons," Tracey commented. She looked more awake now that she had some food in her stomach and something interesting happening before her. "You know, Harry, your owl is pretty violent."

An angry glare from Hedwig and a sharp, barking hoot had the girl's eyes widening as she quickly back tracked.

"I-I mean, not that there's anything wrong with that! I'm sure those owls deserved it! Ha ha ha!"

"Tracey Davis has been whipped by an owl." Daphne's dry wit once more reared its head. Tracey flushed red as a few of their friends snickered at her. Luckily for her, Susan wasn't among those laughing.

"You guys probably shouldn't laugh at her," the soft spoken redhead said. "I bet if Hedwig looked at any of you like that, you would be doing the same thing she is."

Many of those who had been snickering sobered at the thought. It was true. Hedwig's glares were scary.

"Maybe," Blaise broke the silence, "But unlike Tracey, most of us don't shove our foot in our mouth."

A bit more snickering started again, Tracey's face slowly growing red once more.

"Alright, alright." Harry calmed everyone down. "Enough poking fun of Tracey."

Tracey smiled at him.

"Thank you, Harry."

"Don't mention it."

"So who's the letter from?" Hannah asked curiously.

"It's from Hagrid." Harry smiled excitedly. It wasn't much of a letter. There were only two words on it, but those two words were enough to excite him.

"Hagrid?" Terry furrowed his brows a bit. "You mean the Gate Keeper? Giant of a man? Lives in a small hut outside?"

Harry nodded.

"The very same."

"I didn't know you knew him," the comment came from Lisa, but everyone was thinking the same thing.

"I bumped into him in the library a while back," Harry admitted as Daphne leaned curiously over his side to look at the letter. She was close enough that her chin practically rested on his shoulder. He wondered if she even realized how close they were. "I ended up conversing with him for a bit and discovered something intriguing that made me go visit him for a while."

"It's hatching," Daphne read the letter out loud, a curious frown on her face. She looked at Harry inquisitively. while those around them stared

between the two. "What's hatching?"

Harry looked around for a moment, eyes wandering toward the many students surrounding them. None appeared to be listening, but it was probably better to be safe than sorry.

He discreetly summoned his wand, then cast a powerful Silencing Charm around them so no one could hear what he said. He sheathed the wand, then took a deep breath before smiling widely.

"Hagrid has a dragon's egg that's hatching."

"WHAT!?"

Everyone winced as Hermione's surprised screech rang in their ears. Harry was very glad he had the foresight to cast a silencing charm.

"You mean to tell me that Hagrid's got a dragon's egg? That's... that's..."

"Awesome," Tracey chimed in while Hermione was sputtering. "That's got to be one of the coolest things I've ever heard. I've never even seen a dragon's egg before."

"I was going to say illegal." Hermione glared at Tracey, who just waved the girl's words off as one would a fly.

"And it's hatching soon," Harry added excitedly, ignoring Hermione's words. He would admit that he was letting his enthusiasm get the better of him, but really, how many people could say they got to watch a dragon hatching? Probably not very many.

"Is it really?" asked Hannah, sounding just as interested as everyone else. None of them were really big on magical animals, but that didn't mean the idea of seeing a dragon hatching didn't intrigue them. It really was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Hermione was not nearly as enthusiastic.

"It's also illegal to raise a dragon."

"I've always wanted to see a dragon hatching," Lisa admitted with an excited smile, "back during the middle ages, dragons were actually used as beasts of war. It was said that a single dragon was worth over a hundred wizards and twice that many muggle knights."

"And of course the history nerd is only interested in its historical value," Tracey opened her mouth before she could stop herself. Her eyes widened a second later, and she gave a half-angry, half-amused Lisa Turpin an apologetic look. "I mean, not that there's anything wrong with that, cuz, you know, I'm sure stuff that happened centuries ago is really cool and stuff."

Several eye rolls followed her words. The girl was truly good at shoving her foot into her mouth.

"It does sound interesting," Susan added with a small smile. "I mean, how many people can say they got to see a dragon's egg hatching?"

"No one," Terry replied, "not unless you live on a dragon preserve, and even they have to stay clear when a dragon is nesting. I hear dragons are vicious when they have a nest."

"Are you guys even listening to me?" asked an angry Hermione.

"Aren't they always vicious?" Blaise said dryly. Terry rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, they are, but I was saying they're particularly bad when nesting. My dad has a friend who lives on a dragon preserve in the Ukraine as a dragon handler, and he says nothing is more dangerous than a nesting dragon."

"Oi! Pay attention when I'm talking!" Hermione shouted, only to once more be ignored.

"Do you think that Hagrid guy will let us watch as it hatches?" asked Tracey, her voice sounding bubbly, for lack of a better term.

"That's why I'm mentioning it," Harry told her, "I figured he wouldn't mind if I let my friends come with me when it hatches. He'd probably be excited to know so many people are as interested in watching this event as he

is."

As the group of first years continued to excitedly discuss the soon-to-be hatched dragon, Hermione Granger huffed indignantly.

"They're not even listening to me."

Sitting next to her, Neville patted the poor, ignored girl on the shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring manner.

"There, there, Hermione."

The glare she sent him let Neville know he was not helping.

XoX

After Gryffindor's Herbology class with Hufflepuff, the group of friends met up in the Great Hall, before going down to Hagrid's hut to watch the dragon hatch. Thankfully, none of the first years had classes during their second period that day, which meant everyone would get see the event.

A few of Harry's friends, namely Tracey, had wanted to skip class entirely that morning to see the dragon hatching. Hermione put her foot down instantly. While she couldn't convince the others not to go, she was not going to let them ditch class for it. Fortunately for her, she had both Susan, Daphne and Harry backing her up. Even so, the girl still sulked about how no one heeded her warnings at breakfast.

The door to Hagrid's hut opened after Harry knocked on it, revealing the giant of a man himself, who looked mighty surprised to see so many first year students looking at him with excitement.

"Erm..." Hagrid appeared to be rather uncertain as he looked at the large group. "Harry, ye didn' tell me so many people would be comin' over."

"Sorry," Harry replied smoothly, "your letter came to me while I was eating breakfast with my friends, and after telling them about the dragon's egg, they wanted to see it as well." He looked at the large man with a slightly pleading look. "You don't mind, do you Hagrid?"

"Erm... well..."

Hagrid floundered to find an answer that wouldn't end with him giving in. Such came to an abrupt and violent end when Tracey, Hannah and Lisa all gave him the same pleading look as Harry. The giant's shoulders slumped as he opened the door further and gestured for them to come inside.

"Come on in. It'll be a bit cramped, I think, but there ain't much we can do about that now, can we?"

"Actually," Harry amended as he summoned his wand, "I might be able to do something about that."

A few seconds later, everyone was standing around the magically expanded table where the dragon egg sat in the magically expanded room, waiting on baited breath for the egg to hatch. It looked like it might hatch at any second. Harry counted at least sixteen different cracks ranging from small hairline fractures to larger lines about a centimeter thick and getting thicker. Strange clicking noises emerged from the inside, like something hard was tapping against the egg's interior.

"So this is a dragon's egg." Hannah actually looked a little disappointed. "It doesn't look all that different from a normal chicken egg, does it? A bit bigger, and black, but that's about it."

"Dragon's egg or not it's still an egg," Tracey said, "it's not like an egg can look any different than what it is, right? I mean, don't all eggs generally look the same anyway?"

Hannah huffed.

"Yeah, but this is a dragon's egg, not a chicken egg. I just thought it would be a lot more different is all."

"You two might want to be quiet," Harry informed the pair, "it's hatching now."

Everyone went silent and turned their eyes toward the egg. A loud scraping noise emitted from it, and then the egg split open like an

overripe fruit and the baby dragon flopped onto the table.

It didn't really look like much. In fact, like all babies it was kind of ugly, though unlike a human baby it didn't look like a large ball of wrinkled fat. It's all black body was incredibly small and skinny, presenting an abnormal contrast to its wings, which were about twice as large as its body. It had a long snout with wide nostril's, the stubby beginnings of a pair of horns on its head and bulging, orange eyes.

"Man, that thing's kinda ugly," Tracey once more shot her mouth off. Daphne elbowed her in the ribs, eliciting a pained grunt and a glare in return. The blond pureblood just rolled her eyes and focused instead on the fascinating scene before her.

Namely, the scene of Hagrid crying tears of joy as the dragon sneezed and shot out a jet of sparks from its snout.

"Ain't he beautiful," Hagrid murmured. He reached out towards the dragon with his hand to try and stroke its head. Try being the key word. The Ridgeback did not seem as enthused as Hagrid, and snapped at his fingers, allowing Harry to see its sharp fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" said Hagrid. Harry did not think that was the reason the dragon tried biting Hagrid, but didn't say anything.

"I don't think trying to bite your finger off means he thinks you're his mother." Tracey had no such clamp on her mouth. "I think it just means he's annoyed that you're trying to touch him."

"Smooth, Trace," Daphne sighed, "real smooth."

Tracey glared at her friend.

"What? You know it's true."

"So that's a Norwegian Ridgeback," Lisa murmured in fascination. "I've never seen one in real life. Did you know that Norwegian Ridgebacks were at one point used by Scandinavian war mages for areal assaults? Apparently, the flames a Norwegian Ridgeback breaths out are supposed

to be the strongest of all the dragons."

"Hagrid," Hermione began intrepidly, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

"They get pret'y big quickly," Hagrid answered happily. He didn't seem to care about anything other than the tiny dragon currently shooting sparks out of its nostril's. "Mos' times they're fully grown after a few months."

Harry sighed. Now came the hard part. He had not said anything, because he had really wanted to see a dragon as it hatched, but now that the show was over, it was time to give the giant man a wake up call.

"Hagrid, you know you're going to have to go tell Professor Dumbledore about this, don't you? You're not going to be able to keep him."

"What?" Hagrid asked, as if he had not heard Harry speak. Everyone else quieted down and stared at Harry in surprise, Hermione in particular, seemed the most surprised, as if she'd not expected him to say such a thing after going through all this trouble to watch the dragon hatch.

"Raising dragons are illegal without a dragon handlers license," Harry said, "and from what I understand, only a dragon handler can get those. You're going to need to tell Dumbledore, so he can find someone who can take it to a dragon reserve."

"But—"

"What's more, not only is keeping a dragon a large enough offense to earn you a one-month stay in Azkaban prison, you are also currently living at Hogwarts, where a large number of children with politically powerful parents are attending. If they find out that you have a dragon here, and they will because you won't be able to keep this a secret once it becomes fully-grown, they will throw a fit. I doubt you will get off with just a one month sentence to Azkaban."

"But I—"

"And I wouldn't be surprised in the least if Lucius Malfoy convinced Fudge to give you a life-sentence in Azkaban," Harry continued

mercilessly. "And we all know he can. While I hate to admit it, Lucius Malfoy has the most political influence in magical Britain at the moment. If he says jump, then Fudge is not going to ask how high, he's just going to jump."

Hagrid's shoulders seemed to droop as Harry bombarded the poor man with his relentless assault. Harry did feel a little bad for the man, but consoled himself with the fact that at least Hagrid got to see the baby hatch, and that Harry was doing the right thing. Not only would keeping a dragon at Hogwarts put the children at risk, there really was a good chance that Lucius would raise a huge controversy over this, and it wouldn't be that hard to get everyone—even those who normally opposed Malfoy—on board. Really, Harry was doing Hagrid a favor.

"Don't worry," Harry tried to sooth the man who looked ready to break out in tears. "I'm sure Professor Dumbledore will find him a good home."

Hagrid began crying in earnest.

The story is going to start moving a little faster. Now that I've got the ground work laid out for the world this story takes place in, it will be moving much more quickly. I suspect two, maybe three more chapters max before this story ends.

If you have any questions, comments, or critiques, please be sure to leave them in a review, and as always, thank you for reviewing.

Prank and Punishment

Prank and Punishment

"Again!"

Harry narrowed his eyes as he twisted both broom and body into a tight corkscrew, turning about in the opposite direction he'd been flying without losing much, if any, of his speed. He smiled when Oliver Wood, currently playing the roll of opposition Seeker so they could practice this particular play, was forced to loop around the long way because he couldn't do a corkscrew like Harry. Flying some ways away, Fred and George Weasley were doing their best to look as unsynchronized as possible.

Though still a ways off, Oliver Wood had been pushing the Quidditch team in their training as much as possible, so they would be prepared for their next match, which pit them against Ravenclaw. Many of their practices had been extended by at least an hour, and they had even begun practicing on Saturdays and Sundays, much to the protest of every player except for Oliver Wood. Even Harry was beginning to get exasperated with the man's fanaticism.

It also made him wonder if this was how Lisa saw him whenever he spoke of sparring with Master Wei. If so, he could see why she was always so aggravated. It was annoying.

As always, even when Harry's mind was a million miles away, his body still reacted to outside stimuli. When the Weasley Twins both hit the bludger toward him, timing their swings in order to perform the Doplebeater Defense to double the force and thereby the speed the bludger flew at him, Harry waited until the very last second, before pushing himself onto his feet, then jumping over the ball as it sped by in a blur. He landed back on the broom a second later, just in time to hear the dull smacking sound of flesh being hit by a bludger.

Turning around, he was amused to see Oliver Wood holding what looked like a broken nose as he tried to keep himself from falling off his broom.

Harry was actually quite impressed when the Gryffindor Quidditch captain kept a firm grip on the handle until he was four feet from the ground, before falling onto his back on the grass. Those bludgers hurt when you got hit, as Harry now knew from experience, and considering Oliver got smacked in the face, he had to at least have a minor concussion.

"You ok there, Ollie!?" asked the twins, shouting in that synchratic way only they seemed capable of doing.

Oliver Wood's left hand slowly rose into the air, where he presented them all with a thumbs up.

XoX

Quidditch practice lasted a good hour after Oliver broke his nose on a bludger. The man was very grateful that Alicia knew a healing spell that fixed his nose right up, though it did nothing for the throbbing headache the fifth year was likely experiencing. Despite what seemed to be a minor concussion, he still forced himself to practice with the rest of them. After Quidditch practice was over, Harry and the others went back to the locker rooms to clean up and get dressed.

Harry thought about using a spell to clean himself off and a freshening charm to make him smell of fresh linen, as he wanted meet his friends as soon as possible. They were likely already finished with breakfast by now. At the last moment, however, he thought better of it and decided to clean himself off the old-fashion way. While possible to magic away grime and stench, there were some things a nice hot shower could do that magic couldn't.

By the time he finished, Harry knew his friends were done with breakfast. He cast a tempus spell just in case, which only confirmed what he already knew.

Thankfully, Harry was fairly sure he could find them easily. There weren't many places they could socialize, as they were all from different houses, and it was unlikely they would choose to sit around in one of the unused classrooms. Really, the only two places they could go was the library, unlikely since it was Sunday, or outside on the Hogwarts grounds.

Harry decided that the first place he would check would be the Hogwarts ground. It was only logical since he was already outside. With this in mind, the raven-haired boy began making his way to the Black Lake.

His dragon hide boots crunched against the green grass as he walked through the Hogwarts grounds. He marveled at how comfortable the boots were, especially when compared to some of the non-magical boots he's worn before. He wondered if they had comfort charms on them.

He also enjoyed how they went with his clothes, and made a note to himself that dragon hide boots went really well with jeans and a form fitting T-shirt/jacket combination.

As he reached the Black Lake, Harry caught sight of his friends. Blaise sat cross-legged on the grass, quietly conversing with Terry about something. Daphne leaned back on her hands, yet somehow managed to keep an upright posture befitting the status as the pureblood female of a Noble House. Tracey lazily lounged on her side, using her left hand to keep her head propped up. Hannah sat next to Susan and spoke to Neville, while Hermione and Susan were having a discussion that Harry was too far away to hear. Judging from the book in Hermione's hands, Harry's personal notebook, it was likely about one of his spell modifications. Hermione was doing most of the talking, he noticed.

"Hey, Harry!"

Tracey Davis wasn't the first to notice him, but she was most definitely the first to greet him. She waved her hand over her head, shouting out his name as he walked over to them and flopped down on the grass.

"Are you alright, Harry?" asked Susan, her soft voice conveying her concern. "You look really tired."

Harry grunted.

"Wood has been getting increasingly ardent about preparing us for our coming match with Ravenclaw."

"You mean fanatical," corrected Tracey, "I saw that Wood boy wandering down the hall one time muttering Quidditch plays under his breath. I've

never seen anyone as obsessed as he is."

"If that isn't the pot calling the kettle black, then I don't know what is," Daphne teased her friend dryly. Harry still sometimes wondered about the blond pureblood. Despite how she had joined their group and was now more talkative, she still rarely displayed any emotions, and her speech pattern seemed to be permanently stuck on sarcastic, like she had trouble expressing herself in such a large group. Or maybe she just didn't like showing her emotions in front of others.

Harry supposed he could understand, as he often tried to keep himself collected as well, though that had been getting increasingly difficult since coming to Hogwarts.

"I'm not that Quidditch crazy," Tracey retorted, "yes, I think it's the most awesome sport in the entire world, but that doesn't mean I'm a hardcore fan of it. I'm more interested in the brooms."

"So Wood is being pretty tough on you guys then?" asked Susan, ignoring the way Daphne would take snipes at Tracey and the brunette girl would respond. Harry nodded.

"He feels that we need to change things up." Harry pushed himself into a sitting position, placing his hands on the ground behind him and using them to support his torso. "After our almost loss at the hands of your House, he's become more obsessed with training us into the ground."

"But the only reason you guys came close to losing was because of Professor Snape, wasn't it?" Neville scratched the back of his head in honest confusion. "I mean, the Hufflepuff team was good, but we all saw how unfair Snape was being during the match."

"Much as I dislike agreeing with him about my own house team, Neville's right," Hannah admitted. "I might not like Quidditch very much, but even I could tell that you guys are better than my house's team."

Harry shook his head.

"Maybe, but it was more a case of luck that we won. I was in the right position to see the Snitch and it was behind Cedric, so he hadn't even

noticed before I caught it. Had he seen it at the same time as me, the match could have gone either way."

"You know you're very modest," Susan said, smiling softly. "That's an admirable trait."

"Not modest, realistic," Harry corrected the girl. "It's important to know your limitations so you know how far and how hard you need to push to break them. I don't like deluding myself into thinking I'm better than I really am. That leads to arrogance, which is the path to stagnation."

"What do you mean?" Hannah asked quizzically. His words seemed to confuse her, and everybody else, for that matter. Daphne had even stopped poking fun of Tracey, and Blaise and Terry were no longer conversing about their home life, but were instead looking at him.

"Arrogance is one of the seven most basic character flaws, and in my opinion, the most dangerous. It's a form of self-superiority and importance that makes people incapable of seeing any value in a perspective that is different from their own. It makes people not only unable to accept or even acknowledge the beliefs of others, but makes them unable to grow as a person. They're so set in their ways that they can't possibly conceive that their way of doing things might not be the best way."

"Like those decrepit old fools still on the Wizengamot," Blaise added with a nod. Harry turned to look at his dark-skinned friend and raised an eyebrow. The pureblood boy spotted the look and shrugged. "My mother's words."

Harry chuckled. Despite the fact that Celestina Zabini petrified him beyond reasonable comprehension, he couldn't help but think that if he could get over whatever made him fear the woman, they would get along famously.

XoX

After sitting outside for several hours talking and laughing, Harry and the others headed inside for lunch.

"Susan," Harry placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. The redhead's cheeks flushed with color as she turned her head and looked at him demurely. "I heard from the rumor-mill that the kitchens are located near the Hufflepuff common room. Is that correct?"

It was actually kind of funny, as good as the Hogwarts rumor-mill was at catching and spreading rumors like wildfire, very few of them actually seemed to know where the kitchens were. Or if they did, they were keeping it to themselves.

"Um, yes, it is," Susan blinked curiously.

"I was wondering if you knew where it was?"

Susan nodded.

"I do. Cedric showed it to me during our first week of school." Susan's cheeks darkened in color. "I was a bit homesick, so he took me there and asked the house elves to prepare one of my favorite foods for me."

"Nothing wrong with that." Harry gave her a reassuring smile. "I sometimes find myself missing home as well."

Of course, home to him was with the Crawfts, not his relatives, but he felt no need to tell anyone that.

"Would you like me to show you where the kitchens are?" asked Susan.

"I would be very grateful if you could," Harry said, "I've been meaning to try and find them for a while now, but I've just not had the time." Thinking back on it, he probably should have asked the Weasley twins for directions. Harry was sure they knew where the kitchens were.

Ah well, at least now he had someone willing to show him. Hopefully, he would be able to convince the kitchen staff to prepare some healthier food for him.

As they arrived in the Great Hall and sat down, Harry looked over at Hagrid, who was moping in his seat, looking for all the world like someone had killed his puppy. Or gotten rid of his dragon.

"Man, looking at that guy you'd think the world was coming to an end or something," Tracey said as she, too, took a gander at the large man poking his food with a sodden expression.

"Well, Harry did force him to give up his dragon," Hermione pointed out. "You can't really blame him, can you?"

"Aren't you the one who said it was illegal to raise a dragon, though?" asked Lisa. "Not that you're wrong, it's been illegal to raise dragons without owning a dragon handlers license since 1842, but I didn't think you'd be sticking up for Hagrid."

"I'm not," Hermione huffed, indignant that Lisa would even suggest such a thing. "I'm just saying that Hagrid was obviously attached to that dragon since he was the one who hatched it. I suppose that, in a way, you could almost say that he really was its mother. Of course, he's not a dragon, but you know what I mean. It's like when a mother gives birth."

"I think we get it," Daphne said dryly, causing Hermione to flush. Unlike Tracey who would only get embarrassed a bit before snapping back, Hermione was not quite capable of dealing with Daphne's dry, sarcastic tone.

"At least Norberts in good hands now, right?" asked Hannah, turning her attention to Terry. Said boy looked up just as he was about to take a bite out of a chicken leg.

"I would say so," he said after taking a bite of his food and swallowing. "I gave Dumbledore my father's friend's floo address just in case he needed someone capable of taking the Ridgeback off his hands. Granted, I don't think the Ukraine reserve caters to Ridgebacks. From what I've been told, they only raise Ukrainian Ironbellies there."

He shrugged.

"Whatever the case is, I'm sure Dumbledore took care of it."

Lunch continued on, and afterword, Harry told everyone he and Susan would meet up with them later. Together, they made their way to the kitchens, which was located directly under the Great Hall near the

Hufflepuff common room.

Harry followed his friend as she led him to a painting of a bowl of fruit. Susan went up to the painting and tickled the pear that was at about waist height on an average adult, which squirmed and giggled, then transformed into a green door knob.

Harry blinked.

"That has to be the most bizarre entrance to a room I've ever seen," Harry declared blandly. "And considering I have a portrait of a fat lady who likes to try singing soprano guarding my common room, that's saying something."

Susan giggled.

"Ours is concealed behind a stack of barrels, and requires a code to get in," she told him, making him look at her curiously. "If you don't get the code right, you get drenched with vinegar and the magic protecting the room won't let you in."

Harry wrinkled his nose a bit.

"Then I suppose I should just be eternally grateful that horrible singing is the only thing the fat lady is capable of. I would hate to get doused with vinegar. God only knows how hard it would be to get the smell out of my clothes."

After some more giggling from his red-haired friend, Harry and Susan entered the portrait and stepped through to the other side.

The kitchen was massive. Eying the large room, Harry had to guess that it was just as large as the Great Hall itself. In front of him, Harry could see five tables, which were in the exact same position as the ones in the Great Hall. There were a large quantity of pots and pans sitting on counter tops and stoves along the walls, and a large brick fire place sat at the end of the hall, opposite the door.

However, the room was not what had most of Harry's attention. Moving around the room with clockwork efficiency was a large number of

absolutely unusual looking creatures. They were all very short, about two to three feet tall at most, with spindly arms, legs, and a large head and eyes that were disproportionate to the rest of their bodies. Their ears were large and pointy, and reminded Harry of bat ears. And none of them were wearing clothes, but instead seemed to be outfitted in what looked like pillow cases and tea towels.

Harry recognized the creatures from the description Andromeda gave him. House elves. A slave race that lived a symbiotic relationship with wizarding families. In return for serving the family, they were gifted with a unique brand of magic. Or at least, that's how things were supposed to be. Harry did not know the history of the species, but he knew from his talks with the former Black that most House elves were treated horribly by their owners.

A loud squeak came from one of elves as it noticed them. Suddenly, the eyes of every single house elf looked at him and Susan. Harry had to admit that it was disconcerting to see so many large, bulging eyes staring at him.

And then the stampede came as well over three dozen tiny house elves rushed over to them, their ears flopping about their heads with erratic movement. They surrounded the pair and immediately began talking at once, asking him and Susan if they needed anything, or if they could get them something to eat, or if there was anything they wanted. It took Harry nearly 15-minutes to calm them all down and finally ask what he had been hoping to ask them.

"I have here a list of foods I was hoping you guys would be kind enough to make," Harry pulled a small sheet of paper out of his pockets. "Would you guys be able to do that for me?"

Many affirmative sounding squeaks were heard, which Harry took to mean they would do it for him. It was hard to tell since their high pitched voices all blended in together to make what essentially amount to white noise. He thanked them after that, leaving many of them wide eyed and shocked for some reason.

"So those are house elves," Harry mused as he and Susan left the

kitchen. "They're a highly unusual bunch. I had heard about them, but had not realized they would be so... fanatical in their devotion toward what many people consider unseemly duties."

"All of them are like that," Susan told him. "My auntie has a house elf as well, and she acts the same way."

Harry turned to look at her, frowning.

"Do you like living with your aunt?"

Susan furrowed her brow as she looked at him.

"Of course, why do you ask?"

"It's just that..." Harry pursed his lips, searching for the right words. "You sounded a bit... disappointed?" He shook his head. "Sad? Or maybe wistful? Yes, you sounded a bit wistful when you mentioned your aunt's house elf."

"Oh," Susan looked surprised for a second, then turned her head. "I suppose that's because my auntie's house elf, Melony, practically raised me. It's not that I'm unhappy or upset or anything," she added quickly. "Really, I love my auntie, and I know she cares about me, too. It's just that, sometimes, when I was younger, I wished she was there more, you know?"

"Was she busy a lot?" asked Harry.

"Yes. The war against You-Know-Who left the Ministry in a mess. When I was younger, my auntie was an auror, and because there were still a lot of things that needed to be sorted out, and Death Eaters who had gone into hiding, she was always busy. It only got worse when she became the Head of the DMLE."

"But it's ok," Susan smiled suddenly, and Harry found himself impressed that she could smile despite the obviously depressing subject. She was much stronger than people gave her credit for, himself included. "I understand that she has a lot of responsibilities and she always takes time off for me whenever she can. Plus, I have Hannah and her parents.

Me and Hannah have been best friends since we were little, and her mum and dad have always treated me like one of their own."

"And don't forget you've got us now, too," Harry stated. Susan looked at him and he gave her a smile. "Myself, Blaise, Neville, Terry, Lisa, Hermione, Tracey, Daphne, we're your friends too, so you can rely on us whenever you need to."

"Ah."

Susan's cheeks became suffused with pink as she quickly looked away.

"I-I guess that's true," she said softly, still not looking at him. Harry almost rolled his eyes. Really, for someone whose apparently a lot more resilient than anyone gave her credit for, she tended to get embarrassed awfully easily. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

As Harry and Susan continued walking through the corridor, they ran into a scene that had them both rushing forward.

"Neville! Hannah!" Susan gasped as she saw the state her two friends were in. "Are you two alright?"

"I'm fine," Hannah sniffed a bit. She didn't look injured physically; Harry could see no signs of her having been harmed in any way, but it looked like she was close to tears. "But Neville..."

Susan covered her mouth with a hand while Harry clenched his fists as he looked over at Neville. The boy had a large black eye, clearly created by a fist. The skin around his eye puffed up, beginning to swell shut. Whoever hit him had hit very hard. His legs looked very stiff and were also stuck together, as if someone had locked them into place and tied them up. Harry recognized it as the leg-locker curse.

"Who did this?" asked Harry. His voice was barely above a whisper, but Hannah, Susan and Neville heard it, and all three shivered.

"It was Malfoy," Hannah's voice nearly cracked. "We had gotten to the

room we've been using to practice magic in when Hermione said she wanted to get a book from the library. Neville offered to get it for her and I decided to go with him. That's when we ran into Malfoy and his two henchmen. I told him off, but he just started making fun of me and calling me a dirty half-blood. Then he pulled out his wand and said I would make good practice for his curses. Neville, he—" her voice choked for a moment before she found it again, "—he tried to protect me, got in front of them and shielded me. Then that stupid ape, Crabbe, hit him in the face and Malfoy cast a leg-locker curse on him."

"Where are your wands?" Harry asked, calming himself to focus on the matter at hand. While no one except for himself and maybe Daphne were likely to know any serious curses, Harry had at least made sure his friends were well-versed in all of the first year curses and counter curses. They should have been able to defend themselves from someone like Malfoy.

"We left them in the room." Hannah looked down at her shoes, ashamed. "We didn't think we'd need them since we were going to go back anyways."

"You should always carry your wand on you," Harry chided gently. Now was not the time to be harsh, and he really didn't like being cross with his friends, especially for such a simple mistake. This wasn't like the troll incident. "At all times." Hannah nodded, but didn't say anything. He took that to be an affirmation that she wouldn't walk around without her wand and decided to leave it at that.

Susan had already pulled her wand out and cast the counter curse on Neville's legs, freeing them up from their locked position. She then cast what Harry recognized as a very basic first aid charm that reduced swelling. He wondered how she knew it, but then realized her aunt had probably taught it to her since it was a standard auror spell. Tonks had showed it to him when they had first met.

It had been a very painful first meeting.

"Are you alright, Neville?" asked Harry, holding a hand out for the other boy to take.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Neville muttered as he was pulled to his feet. He touched the bruising around his eye, which had not faded much, though most of the swelling was gone, and hissed. "It stings a bit, though. Legs are a little stiff, too."

"Do you want to go to Madam Pomfrey?"

"No," Neville shook his head, "I'm fine. Let's just get back to the others."

Harry nodded, and with his three friends in tow, began traveling toward the room the rest of their friends were in.

While Harry presented a calm and composed face on the outside, on the inside he was seething. Someone had hurt one of his friends. Harry hated bullies thanks to Dudley, but that hatred was made a hundred times worse when someone picked on his friends. Before now that meant Lisa Crawft, but it had since expanded to encompass all the people in his group. They were his friends, and he wasn't going to let something like this go.

Malfoy had not really been much of a problem until now; he assumed the boy would have stayed properly cowed after Harry's threat of making him *persona non grata* to the house of Potter. It seemed as if the threat had lost its influence, however, and something a bit more personal would be needed.

XoX

It was close to midnight when Harry and Neville found themselves standing outside the entrance to the Great Hall.

Well, Harry was actually leaning against the wall, eyes shut and arms crossed as he took deep breaths in and out while a calm, composed expression stayed on his face. Neville, on the other hand, was a nervous wreck, pacing back and forth across the hall lengthwise. The round-faced boy would walk exactly ten feet, pause, about face, then walk ten feet the other way before repeating the process all over again.

"Would you relax, Nev?" Harry sighed, eyes still closed. "Pacing like that's not going to do you any favors. It will just make you more nervous."

"I can't help it," Neville said, though he did stop face and turn to look at Harry. "There's so many things that can go wrong with this. We could get caught."

"We won't," Harry replied confidently. His eyes opened and locked onto Neville. "I set up a very powerful repelling charm that I learned just for this occasion. Only one of the teachers would be able to get past it, and they don't come down this way during patrols. Filch might, but he's a squib, so even if he did, the magic would make him remember that he had something more important to do the moment he got too close."

Neville did not look convinced.

"Still..."

"You were the one who wanted to come with me, remember?" Harry reminded the boy.

"I know that," Neville sighed as he bit his thumb, a nervous gesture he'd picked up from somewhere. It was a tick the boy had, Harry noticed. Whenever Neville was thinking about the possible consequences of something—normally of something that could get them into trouble, he bit the tip of his thumb. "But I just can't help but be nervous."

"I understand, in a manner of speaking," Harry said. "But that's why you wanted to come, right? To get over your nerves by being here when I dealt with Malfoy?"

Neville nodded.

"Yeah."

"And it looks like you're going to get that chance. Blaise is coming."

Neville blinked, then turned to where Harry was looking to see nothing. The heir of Longbottom furrowed his brows, then gave Harry a questioning look. Harry smiled.

"He's disillusioned."

"Naturally," Blaise's voice sounded out from their left, causing Neville to jump. "I would have never gotten out of my bloody dorm if I wasn't."

The air before them shimmered for a second, before revealing the dark-skinned pureblood standing before them, his wand drawn and pointed behind his back. The boy was frowning.

"I hope you appreciate the effort I went through to do this," he said, sounding disgruntled. "It was difficult getting out of the common room, especially with the baggage I have."

"Which is why I taught you the disillusionment charm," Harry informed him. "Which, need I remind you, is not taught in the Hogwarts curriculum. And I even allowed you to use my invisibility cloak."

"I'm not saying I'm not grateful for the new and useful spell," Blaise rolled his eyes as he turned around. He reached out with his hand, grasping something that could not be seen. Then, with a quick yank, pulled off what soon revealed itself to be a silvery cloak, allowing the sleeping form of Draco Malfoy to be seen. "I'm just saying it was difficult getting out of my common room. I had to be careful since there were still a number of seventh years up studying, and I kept bumping my baggage here into the walls when the space got too tight."

He handed the cloak back to Harry, who was grateful to have it back. He had gotten this cloak the night after Christmas. Hedwig had attacked the owl it had been sent with and gave it to him. The cloak had come wrapped in paper, and there had been in a note in loopy handwriting simply stating: *'Your father left this to be before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well.'*

Harry did not know who had given him the cloak, and Hedwig had not known who the owl she attacked belonged to. It was a mystery that bothered him, as he wanted to know who had his father's invisibility cloak, which his dad had spoken of quite fondly—apparently, it was dead useful for pranking. As things stood, however, he had no way to discover who had been in possession of the cloak, though he did have a few suspects.

"As if you care about that," Harry snorted, shaking his head. He gestured

toward the wall right next to the large double doors of the Great Hall. "Set him down over there."

Blaise did as told, while Harry and Neville followed him.

"So what are you going to do?" asked Blaise, eying the wand Harry brought out.

"Draco needs to learn a lesson."

A flick of his wrist and all of the clothing on Malfoy's body with the exception of his underwear vanished.

"One that he apparently did not learn when I chastised him before our first flying lesson."

A jab had the white underwear changing into glow in the dark neon pink.

"And since words do not seem to do the boy any good."

From within his robe, Harry pulled out a small disc and a can of rubber cement. After using an engorgement charm to make the disc wider but not thicker, and lathering one side in the incredibly sticky substance, he cast the levitation charm on the disc. He floated the disc until it hovered several dozen feet above the floor, then cast a sticking charm to keep it stuck to the wall. Another flick of his wand had Draco Malfoy floating into the air.

"More drastic actions are required."

Blaise and Neville watched as Harry pressed Malfoy against the rubber cemented side of the nearly flat disc, upside down, and applied a good deal of pressure until the cement dried. After making sure Draco would not be falling off any time soon, he nodded to himself. Then he cast another charm to make sure all the blood that would soon be rushing to Malfoy's head didn't kill him.

"And you're going to teach him a lesson by pranking him?" Blaise asked, sounding honestly curious.

"Yes." Harry walked over to the now suspended Malfoy and carefully cast a disillusionment charm over the disc. "This particular prank is one that my father pulled when he and his friends were going to Hogwarts. The victim had actually been Snape."

"If this is the kind of prank your father did against Professor Snape, I think I can understand the reason he hates your dad so much," Blaise said dryly. Harry nodded his head.

"I know. To be honest, I can understand why as well." When Blaise looked at him like he had grown a second head, Harry smiled and shrugged. "I never said I didn't understand his hatred for my father. I don't even blame him for hating my dad. I just dislike how he is willing to take his hatred of someone who has been dead for ten years out on me simply because I'm that man's son. Punishing the child for the sins of the father is a terrible crime, and was the whole reason I had not done something like this to Draco sooner."

"That makes sense, I suppose," Blaise agreed.

"Now..." Harry looked at them both. "Blaise, cast a disillusionment charm on yourself, if you will. I don't want Malfoy knowing you had a hand in this." Blaise nodded and did as told, and Harry turned to Neville, handing the boy his cloak. "Since you don't know the disillusionment charm and I can only hold one spell indefinitely like this, you're going to need to put this on."

Neville frowned.

"Why?"

"Because when I wake up Malfoy, I don't want him knowing either you or Blaise knew of this. So long as he has no evidence of you two being involved, he can't implicate you. Plausible deniability and all that."

"You're going to wake him up? Why?"

Harry's smile turned feral, causing Neville to shudder.

"As I said, I need to teach Draco a lesson. Can't do that if he's not awake

to learn it now, can I?"

When Neville was under the cloak and Blaise under a disillusionment charm, Harry began the process of waking Malfoy up.

The boy had been put under a sleep via potion that Harry had slipped into his food using one of the house elves. The house elf hadn't known what the potion did, and Harry had no intention of informing the little critter, but that was neither here nor there.

Levitating a small phial filled with the potion that would wake the boy up, Harry stuck the open end into Draco's mouth and forced the blond Slytherin to drink it. Malfoy woke up, sputtering and coughing as Harry withdrew the phial and levitated it back into this hand before storing in his robes. Draco looked around for several seconds, his eyes widening in panic before they landed on Harry.

His face turned Weasley red.

"Potter!" he snarled, "What do you think you're—"

His tirade was cut off before it could truly begin when Harry cast not a silencing charm, but an asphyxiation curse that cut off the boy's air passage. Draco Malfoy choked as he tried to breath, only for no oxygen to come through as his throat constricted. It wasn't until the boy began turning blue that Harry cut the charm, then cast a silencing spell over him so he couldn't talk.

Harry's eyes were cold.

"I warned you about what would happen if you picked on my friend, Draco Malfoy," Harry hissed like a snake, his voice cold, dangerous. Deadly. Malfoy reared his head back as if struck, eyes widening in fear. "This is going to be your last warning, so I want you to listen carefully. If you ever go near any of my friends again, if I even suspect you of having insidious intentions toward them, I will hunt you down and bring you such suffering that Voldemort would piss himself in fear. Remember that the next time you decide to act like an insipid little imbecile."

A second after he finished talking, Harry jabbed his wand at Draco. A red

flash of magic shot out, striking the boy in the chest and making him slump over, unconscious.

"You're pretty scary when angry, you know that?" said Blaise as he canceled his disillusionment charm. Harry gave the boy an almost feral grin. Blaise shivered.

"So I've been told."

"And you do realize that once the silencing charm wears off, Malfoy is going to rat you out?" Blaise continued. "You're probably going to get a pretty harsh punishment for this."

"I suspect that I will," Harry agreed. "But that's fine. This lesson wouldn't have been effective if Malfoy didn't know who did this to him."

"I'm not sure I understand," Neville spoke up. Harry regarded the boy and Blaise for a moment, pondering whether he should tell them, before deciding they probably deserved to know his reasons for doing this.

"Think about, Neville," Harry began, "if Draco Malfoy had simply been pranked, but did not know who did it, he would have realize this was a warning for him not to pick on my friends. I revealed myself so he would know not to mess with any of my friends."

Harry paused, gathering his thoughts.

"You must also think about this from Draco's perspective. He doesn't know how I got him out of his dormitory, nor how I managed to stick him onto the wall in nothing but his briefs, without him waking up. In effect, he knows nothing about how I managed to accomplish a seemingly impossible task, just that I did. He now knows that nowhere is safe for him. That I can get to him at anytime I please, regardless of whether he's in his house common room, or somewhere else."

"You're doing this to make him fear you," Blaise said suddenly, eyes widening. "By showing him that you can get him even when he's in his own common room, but not revealing how you managed to accomplish it, you're going to make him so fearful and paranoid of you that he's going to be jumping at shadows, thinking it might be you coming after him."

"People always fear the unknown," Harry agreed. "That he knows what I did, but not how I did it, is going to put the fear of god into him."

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, muggle term," Harry shook his head, "It's a part of what's known as the Old Testament by the Christian religion. It means 'the abject terror of an unrepentant sinner before the justice of God.'"

Blaise looked thoughtful.

"I don't know anything about muggle religion, but I think I understand. In this instance, Malfoy is this unrepentant sinner and you would be God."

"Exactly."

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," Blaise joked weakly. The smile Harry gave him was rueful.

"You're my friend so I doubt you'll need to worry," the raven-haired boy said, "However, if you ever do begin irritating me to the point where I want to string you up by your briefs and hang you upside down, I'll be sure to let you know."

Blaise just shuddered.

XoX

The next morning everyone who entered the Great Hall got a good look at Draco Malfoy in nothing more than his bright pink underwear. Many students laughed themselves into hysterics when they saw the boy. It was made even worse for the blond Slytherin because he had not only awoken an hour after being stunned by Harry, but was also upside down *and* wide awake when every single student entering the Great Hall began laughing at him.

It was a very bad time to be Draco Malfoy.

And so the boy was forced to listen, red-faced, as students of all houses and ages pointed and laughed at him. The fact that he couldn't even

speaking because he was still under the effects of Harry's Silencing Spell made the situation that much more unbearable for the boy.

Tracey Davis was particularly joyful at seeing the Malfoy heir put in his place.

"That has to be the funniest thing I've ever seen," the brunette cackled like a madwoman, "I wish I knew who did this so I can shake their hand."

Her words caused Neville, who had been quiet for most of breakfast, to look at Harry. While most of their friends focused more on the unfortunate situation Draco Malfoy found himself in, Daphne was observant enough to see the round-faced boy's discreet glance. She leaned over until her mouth rested against Harry's ear so she could whisper to him.

"That was you, wasn't it?" she asked, "You're the one who did this."

"Guilty as charged," Harry whispered back. Daphne nodded to herself, then cast another glance at Draco.

"How come they can't get him down?"

Harry looked over to where Professor's Minerva McGonagall, Filius Flitwick and Aurora Sinistra were trying to get Malfoy down without luck. He watched as, one after the other, they cast every spell they could think of to unstick Malfoy from the wall, only for nothing to work. They all seemed stumped by the fact that none of the spells they cast were capable of getting the boy down.

"It's because of the way I stuck him on the wall," Harry whispered into her ear. "You see, they think he's stuck to a wall with a sticking charm, but the truth is, he's actually stuck to a flat disc that I disillusioned. The side Malfoy is stuck to is covered in industrial strength rubber cement, which is in turn stuck to the wall with a sticking charm."

"I see," Daphne murmured, "they're trying to dispel a charm they think is placed on him, when in truth, he's not stuck on there with a spell, but muggle means. They spend time trying to cancel a spell on him that isn't there, when they should be canceling the spell on the disc."

"Which they can't see," Harry nodded at her. Daphne's eyes shifted again. The curious look disappeared, and a hint of respect replaced the previous emotion in her eyes.

"That's rather ingenious," she admitted, causing Harry to smile, "I take it this is revenge for what he did to Hannah and Neville."

"It's more of a lesson than revenge," Harry said, then paused before correcting himself. "Well, it's more of a warning than anything else, but you get my point."

Daphne nodded in understanding. As someone who had been taught a lot about politics, she could read between the lines and get to gist of what he was saying. The only other person in their group who *might* have been able to deduce Harry's meaning from so few words was Blaise.

"Oi, oi!" Tracey's voice sounded out, bringing the pair's attention to her, and everyone else's attention to them. "What are you two whispering about over there?"

"Daphne was just speculating on who might be responsible for Draco's *most unfortunate situation*," Harry said, his voice mimicking the dry tone Daphne often spoke in. She sent him a mildly annoyed look only slightly ruined by the amusement hidden behind her icy blues.

"Do you know who did it?" Lisa asked Daphne curiously.

Harry silently watched the conversation as he ate his food. The house elves had really come through for him. He didn't know how they managed to get the ingredients to make chicken cacciatore so fast, nor how they learned to cook it so quickly, but it was quite good.

"I have a few suspects," the blond pureblood admitted, but did not elaborate further.

Lisa opened her mouth, probably to ask another question regarding Daphne's 'suspects,' when Severus Snape arrived on the scene. The man took one look at Draco, who by now looked close to tears due to how humiliated he was, snarled, then stomped into the Great Hall.

His eyes scanned the room before landing on Harry. His lips still peeled back in a vicious snarl, he stormed over to where the Gryffindor boy sat.

"Potter!"

"Yes?" asked Harry, his voice mild and uncaring as he stared at the nearly frothing at the mouth potions professor. "Something I can do for you, Professor?"

Harry's mild mannered tone seemed to enrage the man further.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor and detention for this inexcusable prank!" The man yelled out. "To think I actually thought you might not be as stupid and dimwitted as your pathetic excuse for a father! It seems arrogance and moronic tendencies runs in the family!"

Harry closed his eyes and slowly counted backwards from ten in his mind. When he opened his eyes again, his gaze was still mild, if a little cold.

"I'm going to ignore the way you insulted my father," Harry said, "I can understand why you hate the man, given the rivalry you had with him at school. Though I personally think you would be better off relinquishing your hatred for him. It does you no favors and makes you look very petty."

"Petty?!" Snape looked like he didn't know whether to be shocked at Harry's audacity in speaking to him this way, or angry at how the boy was speaking to him with such disrespect.

The Great Hall, which had already been silent when Snape stormed in, began to grow restless as everyone watched the scene before them unfold. Harry wondered what the sheep were thinking as they saw him all but insulting a Hogwarts Professor. Were they shocked by his words? Awed by his audacity? Disgusted with him? Or did they respect him for doing what many people in three of the four houses probably wished had been done by now?

Harry didn't know, and if he were honest, wasn't entirely sure he cared beyond the fact that he needed them to follow him. But then, he was

pretty sure they would follow his lead when the time came anyway. It was the way of sheep, after all, to follow those who led.

"Yes," Harry nodded, "petty. The dead have no enemies, Professor, and should be left in peace." Harry then cocked his head to the side, a curious expression on his face. "Unless, of course, you are a ghost. They might have enemies, but that's neither here nor there."

Snape gawked at the raven-haired child, his mouth seemingly disconnected from his mind as he worked it and tried to speak. Nothing came out.

"Severus!" Professor McGonagall's voice cracked like a whip as she walked over to where the confrontation was taking place. "You cannot go around accusing students of pulling something like this without proof!"

"Proof?!" Snape regained his mind and sneered. "I don't need proof! I know it was Potter! Just look at him, sitting there like the smug little bastard he—"

"Severus Snape!" Professor McGonagall's lips tightened into a thin line of displeasure. "We do not go around insulting students. Even if Mr. Potter *did* commit this... act, you cannot just spout vulgarities at him. And we still don't know if Mr. Potter even did this to Mr. Malfoy."

Snape's face turned red. He looked about ready to explode. Before he could, however, Harry stepped into the conversation.

"I am afraid, Professor McGonagall, that Professor Snape is indeed correct in his suspicions," Harry said. "I did do that to Draco."

Professor McGonagall's mouth fell open in surprise while Snape looked shocked that Harry had actually admitted to committing the prank on Draco. The rest of the hall, which had been quiet, somehow managed to seem even more silent than before.

"You did?" McGonagall asked, as if she had not heard him the first time. Harry nodded. "Why?"

"Because he hurt my friends."

Snape blinked as Professor McGonagall looked at him in disappointment.

"Mr. Potter, I am very disappointed in you. You should have come to me and allowed me to take care of this. It is not your place to dish out punishments toward your peers."

Harry shrugged, not willing to share his opinions on the matter. Professor McGonagall frowned.

"I am afraid that Professor Snape's punishment will stand. Fifty points will be docked from Gryffindor and you will serve detention with Hagrid." Snape looked ready to say something about Harry serving detention with Hagrid, but a withering glare from Professor McGonagall had him shutting his mouth so quickly his teeth clacked together.

It seemed not even he was immune to the woman's intimidating stare.

"That's fine, Professor." Harry wasn't too concerned with the punishment or the lost points. It wasn't like losing fifty points would do much in the long run. He had already earned over 200 points on his own, and even with the docking of 50 points, Gryffindor was still in the lead by over 175 points.

Not that he actually cared about the House Cup in general, but the sheep did.

"I am willing to accept any punishment you give me."

Professor McGonagall dithered for a moment, as if unsure about Harry's reaction. He couldn't really blame her. Here he was, ready and willing to accept any punishment given without a care in the world. It was almost like he had expected it.

He had, but she didn't need to know that.

After a second, the stern-looking woman settled for a nod.

"Very well," she sighed, "now, perhaps you could get Mister Malfoy down."

"Of course." Harry stood up and walked over to where Professor's Flitwick, Aurora and now Sprout were watching the spectacle next to a strangely gleeful yet embarrassed Draco Malfoy.

Without a word, Harry jabbed his wand at Malfoy, shooting a cold jet of water that had the boy screaming in silent pain as he was blasted by liquid with the strength of a muggle fire hydrant. The rubber cement sticking to his naked back softened, and his body began falling toward the ground. Before the Professor's could even bring out their wands, Harry already flicked his at Draco again, casting a levitation charm and gently setting him back on his feet.

Another flick and he was dry. Then another had him clothed in a basic set of black robes, and finally, one more flick canceled the silencing charm on the now gawking boy.

"I would suggest heading back to your dorm," Harry told Draco. "Those clothes are conjured from my magic, and as such won't last more than five minutes." Conjurations never lasted long, and Harry simply wasn't good enough to make them last longer, especially something as difficult to conjure as clothing.

Without another word, Harry walked passed the gaping professor's, passed the wide-eyed students, and sat back down with his friends. There were a few seconds of silence, then chaos reigned as students began jabbering and talking and pointing at Harry and the Great Hall, where Draco Malfoy could be seen running back to his dorm.

"I can't believe you, Harry!"

Hermione seemed most irate with him. She even crossed her arms and gave him an almost picture perfect McGonagall glare. Of course, the effect was completely ruined by the fact that she was an 11-year old girl.

"You shouldn't have taken matters into your own hands," she continued. "You should have gone to Professor McGonagall."

"Don't listen to the bookworm, Harry," Tracey said, making Hermione switch from glaring at Harry to her. "I think what you did was awesome."

She sighed happily, a dreamy expression on her face.

"I've always wanted to see that ponce put in his place. He's been unbearable ever since the school year started. He thinks he's the Prince of Slytherin just because his daddy's rich and can bribe the Minister of Magic, and because of that he feels like he can simply walk all over everyone who doesn't agree with him." Though neither Blaise nor Daphne said anything, it looked like they agreed. "But with what just happened, I think he's going to have a very hard time finding any support in our house no matter how powerful his father is."

"He still should have gone to Professor McGonagall," Hermione was determined to make them see her point of view. Unfortunately, Harry did not agree with her point at all.

"Hermione, while in some cases I may agree with you, this was not one of them. So I must respectfully disagree."

Hermione gawked at him.

"Why do you think that?" asked Hannah at the same time Hermione asked "what?".

"Draco Malfoy is a bully," Harry stated, "and if there is one thing I've learned about bullies, it's that taking things to a teacher only makes them worse. It doesn't fix the problem, it exacerbates it because now, not only did they have to suffer the indignation of detention, but they know it's because you ratted them out, and they're going to take their anger out on you, and they will do so by being twice as nasty as before."

"The problem with bullies is that they only understand one thing: force, or power, if you will. By showing them that you have power over them, and that you aren't afraid to meet their force with a greater force of your own, you'll show them that you aren't someone to mess with. Make them fear you, and they'll never try anything again."

"But that's wrong," Hermione stated, still determined. "You shouldn't use fear to make people obey you. It's not right."

"Hermione," Harry sighed, "you are a very intelligent witch, but you don't

understand how the world works. Governments all over the world use fear to keep their enemies in line. The muggle world has their nuclear warheads, which are capable of destroying entire cities in seconds. It's the biggest example of my stick is bigger than yours. The 'you try something and we'll blow you to kingdom come.' The ultimate death threat. And all governments do this."

Hermione stared at Harry, her mouth parted in surprise, eyes the size of dinner plates. Harry was sure that, if their topic of conversation wasn't so serious, he would have been amused.

"Our government's not like that," Susan said softly.

"Isn't it?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. "Our government is ruled by their own fears. Why else do you think no muggleborn has ever been able to rise in office within the Ministry of Magic? Why is it that muggleborn's aren't allowed a seat on the Wizengamot? Or why muggleborn's are often only given the lowest of the low as far as jobs are concerned? It's because of fear. Fear of change. Fear that if they let muggleborn's rise through the ranks, they will change our ways, change our traditions, change everything that makes our society different from the non-magical world. And in a way, that may be true, but only because our society doesn't teach muggleborn's any better. We have no classes on wizarding traditions, nothing that teaches them about our societies laws and why we have them, no lessons that explain our reasons for why we do what we do. Nothing. And again, it's all because of fear. Fear that if we do teach muggleborn's about our culture, then the nobility will no longer be needed, that they're positions will be usurped by newer, more powerful and innovative people. The truth is that our world is ruled by fear. It's what allowed Voldemort to nearly destroy our society in the first place."

Harry frowned at the flinches that went around the table. He kind of understood that they were afraid because of what they learned from their parents about just how horrible Voldemort had been. He was like the magical version of the boogiemán. But to allow a deadman so much control that they couldn't even hear his name without flinching in fear just went to prove his point.

"I don't want to be harsh or anything," Harry continued after a moment. "But you must understand, Sue, that even though there are people in our government who are courageous and fair and just like your aunt, the vast majority are bigoted and distrusting and greedy and fearful. It's the whole reason people like Lucius Malfoy were able to walk free after the war, and it's the whole reason the war didn't end until Voldemort failed to kill a one-year old baby."

More flinches, but Harry ignored them.

"Had everyone in the wizarding world rose up and fought against the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters, the war would have been over long before any of us were born. The Death Eaters were outnumbered by at least fifteen to one. They were no larger than a band of mercenaries. However, fear of the Dark Lord made the people cower, fear of his cruelty, fear of his viciousness. They became so afraid of him and what he could do that they let him slaughter anyone who stood in his way, even those people who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time." Harry took a slow, shuddering breath. "So you're wrong, the wizarding world is just like the muggle world."

Dinner after that was eaten in silence, as each of Harry's friends were left to their thoughts. Blaise appeared contemplative as he ate slowly. Hannah and Susan remained silent, though Hannah seemed a bit uncertain while Susan looked more thoughtful. Hermione didn't speak, her face a mix between thoughtful and angry. Neville seemed the be thinking about his words the most. Tracey was extremely subdued as she ate, while Lisa and Terry cast the occasional worried glance at him.

A hand touched his arm. Harry turned to see Daphne looking at him with a smile and warm eyes, and he found himself smiling as well. Unlike the others, she probably understood where he was coming from, knew why he thought this way. No one else had faced the harsh realities like they had, and Daphne knew the faults of wizarding society better than anyone, being a bi-product of them herself.

Harry ignored the strange butterflies in his stomach. Eating something so healthy after having been forced to sustain himself on the oily junk Hogwarts fed their students for so long had probably given him

indigestion.

So, Harry's a bit jaded, isn't he? It's the unfortunate consequence of someone growing up too fast and learning too much too soon. Anyways, I hope I wrote this chapter well. I wanted to show how different Harry is when dealing with different people. You'll notice that he's very loyal and protective of his friends, but uncaring of people he feels are nothing more than 'sheep' and ruthless when dealing with people who earn his ire.

Well, I hope you guys let me know what you think. Once again, if you have any questions, comments, or critiques, please leave it in a review.

Now, I would tell you all to worship the log, but since this is not a Naruto fic, I'll simply thank you for your patronage and reviews in advance.

Detention, Into the Forbidden Forest

Detention, Into the Forbidden Forest

All throughout the day and into the next morning most of Harry's friends were very subdued. Even Tracey and Hannah, the most talkative of their group, remained mostly silent, speaking only when spoken to, and even then, it was with one word answers. Harry wasn't sure if it was because of his speech yesterday morning on how governments around the world, be they magical or not, worked, or if there was some other reason they were all so quiet.

Logic would indicate it was the former.

After laying in his bed last night, Harry had realized that his words had probably not been the best thing to say to his friends. They were all so young, and he didn't mean in the physical sense. Much like his friend Lisa Crawft, the friends he had here at Hogwarts were innocent, for lack of a better term. They had the naivety only innocence can bring, and while a few of them had led somewhat difficult lives, such as Susan's case of living with an aunt she rarely got to see growing up, it did not change the fact that they had never really been exposed to harsh realities of life like he had.

Knowing that he may have just shattered some of their common misconceptions about how real life worked was enough to make him cringe. He tried consoling himself by stating that it's better to have the veil of illusions pulled from your eyes early, but it didn't really help. In fact, it only made him feel worse, especially when he remembered that old saying 'ignorance is bliss.' The entire fiasco had left his mind in an internal debate that lasted all night, until he had actually passed out from mental exhaustion.

What's worse was that his mind had been so busy berating itself that he had fallen asleep before he could clear it. This had led to him having another nightmare. While he got them often enough, they were usually sporadically mixed in with dreams of better times. That he not only

dreamt about one of the lowest points in his life, but the point where he had truly begun realizing how harsh the world really was, merely served to confirm the fact that he was troubled by what happened yesterday.

He shuddered for a moment, wondering what was worse; watching as Voldemort killed his mother and then set his sights on him, or the abuse he had suffered from his relatives.

A hand laid itself on his. Harry blinked, then looked down to see a delicate porcelain hand and graceful fingers settled over his own. He followed the hand to the equally feminine wrist, up the arm, and soon found himself staring into the warm blue eyes of Daphne Greengrass.

"Are you alright?" she asked in a hushed whisper so that no one else could hear. "You look tired."

"I'm fine," Harry reassured her, or at least tried to. She didn't seem very reassured. He grimaced, remembering how he had seen bags under his eyes this morning. She no doubt saw them as well. "I just had a bad dream last night is all."

Daphne looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded slowly. There were no words of comfort, no sympathy or pity, just an understanding nod. She gave his hand a small squeeze, then began daintily eating her breakfast, before anyone could notice the small moment that had taken place between them.

Harry focused on his food, hoping that by doing so, he could keep himself occupied until he had time to clear his mind. The warm ceylon tea helped him a little, and Harry made himself a note to thank the house elves for getting it so expediently when he saw them again.

He spent a moment observing his friends as he sipped at his tea, hoping to god the caffeine would wake him up. It was a vain hope. Stimulants, be they natural or otherwise, never affected his physiology.

Blaise was silent, not surprising as he was usually silent, but he seemed even quieter than usual. Terry as well, neither had done much speaking or even glanced at anyone during breakfast. On the other hand, Lisa, Hannah and Susan had been shooting worried glances at him all

throughout their meal. He wondered what they were thinking. Hermione had a thoughtful frown on her face, no doubt thinking about what he said last night. She was always the most learned of their little group besides him. He didn't doubt that she was trying to discern if what he said was true. Neville, likewise, looked silently contemplative. He was probably the hardest for Harry to judge, just because it was difficult to determine whether the boy was taking his words to heart, or if they had disturbed him the most.

Perhaps the most unusual reaction from the group was the last member of the Slytherin Trio. Tracey Davis ate her meal slowly, her eyes slightly glazed as she went through the motions of chewing her food. It was abnormal to see her so quiet and not saying something that would inadvertently insult someone.

Harry closed his eyes and sighed, wondering if perhaps he had screwed up his friendship with these people. The thought made him nauseous.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," Daphne muttered next to him. Harry opened his eyes and looked at her, but she was not looking at him. Her eyes, normally icy cold or luke-warm, now burned with a determined fire as she stared at her best friend. "Tracey, what the hell is wrong with you?"

Tracey blinked several times as the rest of their friends turned to stare at the normally stoic and sarcastic blond in shock.

"E-excuse me?"

"You heard me." Daphne rolled her eyes. "You look like someone broke your broom. I know that not even you are normally this dead in the morning, so why don't you wake up, you bloody broom fanatic."

"Broom fanatic," Tracey's right eye gained a slight twitch. "Now listen here, just because I happen to like knowing what good brooms are out there, doesn't mean I'm obsessed."

"You are as obsessed with brooms as Wood is with Quidditch," Daphne told her. Tracey gaped.

"You take that back!"

"No, I don't think I will."

Tracey's face scrunched up, her nose wrinkling. She reminded Harry of an angry cat.

"You... you..."

Harry snorted into his cup, making the brunette switch her ire from Daphne to her.

"Don't you start laughing at me, too! You are the last person who has the right to make fun of me!"

Harry held up his hands in a gesture of defense.

"I never said anything."

"No, but I'm sure you were thinking it."

Daphne's sarcastic taunting and Tracey's outraged words knocked the others out of their stupor. It started slowly at first, but soon everyone was talking again, and though a little subdued, laughter soon permeated the group.

Harry looked over at Daphne, who caught his eyes with her own. He smiled at her, speaking to her through his eyes.

Thank you.

Daphne's lips twitched into a small half-smile. Her normally icy blues were currently warm and inviting. She really did have beautiful eyes, and Harry could read the message within them as clearly as she could read his.

You're welcome.

XoX

Thursday brought with it an interesting event. School had not really changed much since Harry taught Malfoy his 'lesson.' Harry was still

popular among his peers. In fact, in some ways, he was more popular now than he had been before. It seemed a number of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws had also been bullied by him and his two Gorilla-like henchmen.

Harry was surprised he had never heard of this until now. He was sure that with how the Hogwarts rumor-mill worked, he would have heard about it a while ago.

Then again, he would also admit that he had not been spending much time paying attention to rumors. Most of Harry's focus was on his studies and his friends.

In either event, the 'prank' Harry had pulled on Malfoy earned him more favor with a majority of students. Even a few Slytherins seemed to appreciate him putting the pureblood boy down a few pegs. He must not have been well-liked in his own House, just as Tracey said, and the only reason people followed him was because of their fear of his father.

That thought almost made Harry frown. Malfoy's father was a rather interesting subject of study. Generally speaking, the man was not all that powerful. He was wealthy, but there were people out there who had accrued far more money than Lucius had. In fact, after the Potters and Blacks, which were currently the wealthiest families, the next family in line was the Zabinis, followed by the Longbottoms, and then the Malfoys. Lucius was, in truth, only the fifth wealthiest person in magical Britain. Granted, neither the Longbottom, Potter or Black fortunes could be used right now, which meant only the Zabini's could compete with him. But while that may have had something to do with Lucius' current power, it did not answer all of Harry's questions.

He also had influence, but if people like Celestina Zabini truly cared to do anything, his influence in the Ministry could have been, if not neutralized, then at least downsized. That left the question of how Lucius Malfoy had managed to gain so much power in so short a time. Bribes could only take one so far, after all.

Harry had a few theories as to how Lucius had managed to become such a large political powerhouse, despite his families assets actually being

worth less than a few other houses.

Thoughts on Lucius aside, Harry put his mind to other subjects.

The twins had been particularly ecstatic about his prank. Even now, he could hear the near drunken sounding cheers and prayers he had received from them upon entering the Gryffindor common room the night after his prank. They had been rather ecstatic to see someone else taking up the 'noble' duty of pranking.

Too bad Harry had no intention of doing anymore pranks unless it served a purpose like with Malfoy.

There were a few, like Hermione, who did not approve of what he did, but Harry wasn't sure he really cared about what they thought. If anything, he found himself caring less and less for the thoughts of people he only knew in passing. Sheep would always be sheep, and they would always follow the people who had the most power, be it politically or otherwise.

Harry looked up from where he was helping Fey Dunbar with the Switching Spell, she was very near to completing it, and observed the rest of the Transfiguration class. Most of the students were working diligently. Dean and Seamus waving their wands, attempting to cast the Switching Spell, though they were not having much success. Dean was having more success than Seamus though, who was on his fourth apple and jar, having made the last three burst into flames.

Just how it was Seamus could actually set a glass jar on fire was something not even Harry could figure out.

Ron Weasley and Zacharis Smith were also working together. Neither one was having much luck. They didn't seem to have as much aptitude for Transfiguration as some of the other students did. Not surprising, Transfiguration was one of the hardest subjects of study here. Once he finished helping Fey, he would see if he couldn't walk them through the process.

Hermione was actually helping Sally-Ann Perks with her Transfiguration. The bushy-haired witch was getting much better at making her teaching style more original. Before, all she would do was paraphrase the books,

which was why no one wanted to listen to her. Harry had told her as much, and it seemed she had taken his words to heart.

Harry was also very pleased to see that Susan was actually helping students out as well. She was one of the few in class who had a natural aptitude for Transfiguration. The demure and soft-spoken girl was currently helping Neville and Hannah, neither of whom were very good at this particular branch of magic.

After making his rounds and doing what he could to help out as many students as possible, Harry ended up back in his original seat next to Susan and Neville just as class ended.

"Remember, next week we will be having a test to see how well you can perform the Switching Spell," Professor McGonagall told them as the bell rang. Several groans met her pronouncement, but she ignored them. "If any of you need help, be sure to come to me after class. I have also given Mr. Potter permission to oversee people when they practice as well."

As Harry picked up his bag, he turned to his friends, about to suggest they meet up with the others since they had a free period now, when he stopped.

Neville was nowhere near them.

Blinking several times, Harry began his search for the round-faced boy. He was talking to Professor McGonagall. Curious, Harry walked over to his friend and Transfiguration teacher, the three girls following him, to hear what must have been the end of their conversation.

"So you see," Neville was saying, "I deserve to be punished just as much as Harry for what happened to Malfoy."

Curiosity was replaced by shock as he easily picked up Neville's last few words. All Harry could do now was wonder why. Why was Neville doing this? Why tell Professor McGonagall about the small part he played in Malfoy's prank when he could have gotten away Scott free?

Professor McGonagall looked at Neville for several seconds before a

tight smile lined her face.

"I do not know whether to commend you for sticking with your friend, or berate you for your stupidity, Mr. Longbottom." She sighed. "Since you have decided to come clean of your own free will, I will not be taking any points off. However," the stern woman gave him an even sterner glare. "You will be serving detention with Hagrid this Friday with Mr. Potter."

"That's fine, Professor," Neville said before turning around and walking towards Harry, Hannah, Hermione, and Susan.

Harry turned to look at the three girls he was with. They were looking just as shocked as Harry felt, and he wondered if he would have the same open mouth and wide-eyed look as them if he weren't currently using his Occlumency lessons to keep calm.

"I can't believe you just did that," Hannah said as they walked down the corridor after leaving the Transfiguration classroom. Neville shrugged.

"Part of the reason Harry got into trouble was because of me. Had I been able to defend myself from Malfoy, had I just brought my wand with me, none of this would have happened. I'm not going to let Harry take all the blame for something that was also my fault."

Hannah looked down at the ground in shame, no doubt remembering that it was also her fault Neville had gotten hurt protecting her from Draco Malfoy's spell.

"But it's not like you made Harry do that to Malfoy," Hermione pointed out.

"Maybe, but he did that to warn Malfoy off for messing with me and Hannah," Neville shrugged, "The least I can do is stick with him when he gets in trouble for helping me."

Hermione went silent after that, her mind turning inward as she contemplated his words. Susan and Hannah both looked surprised, but the redhead wore a soft smile at the show of loyalty Neville displayed toward Harry.

And Harry? Well, he was feeling kind of strange. It was different than the

butterflies in his stomach that he felt around Daphne Greengrass and Lisa Cawft. If he had to describe the feeling, he would have to say it felt 'warm.'

"Thank you," Harry said softly, causing the other four to look at him. "It's nice to have someone who's willing to watch my back." He smiled at Neville. "I really appreciate it."

Neville grinned at him, and for just a second, Harry thought he saw a glimpse of what Neville would one day become.

"It's nothing," Neville said, "I was just doing what any good friend would do, right?"

Harry chuckled.

"Right."

XoX

At eleven o'clock on Friday night, Harry and Neville found themselves standing in the entrance hall where the met Filch, the crotchety old caretaker technically in charge of making the students abide by the rules, but was often considered a joke. None of the children ever listened to him, and most made fun of him because he was a squib.

The man stood next to a boy Harry recognized very well. After all, he had just made the blond suffer quite the humiliation a few days ago. Malfoy noticed him as well, it seemed, because the boy paled and hid behind Filch.

Harry was actually confused about Malfoy's presence. For a moment, he wondered why the boy was here, but soon reasoned that McGonagall must have decided to punish Malfoy for what he did to Neville and Hannah, despite the humiliation he had already suffered at Harry's hands.

Personally, Harry thought his punishment for the boy was much worse than anything the teachers could do.

Filch was a very gangly man, with ragged, ratty hair and an unclean face. He always stood stooped over, as if he suffered from some kind of back disease. His clothing consisted of dirty gray robes, and his slightly rotten teeth gleamed darkly as he gave the two a gleeful smile.

"Follow me."

Filch lit the lamp in his hand and led the boys outside.

"I bet you'll think twice about breaking a school rule again, won't you, eh?" he said, leering at them. "Oh yes... hard work and pain are the best teachers if you ask me... It's just a pity they let the old punishments die out... hang you by your wrists from the ceiling for a few days, I've got the chains still in my office, keep 'em well oiled in case they're ever needed... Right, off we go, and don't think of running off, now, it'll be worse for you if you do."

"You think they actually did punishments like that?" Neville asked quietly. Though he tried to mask it, Harry could hear the fear in his voice plain as day.

"Doubtful," Harry said with a smile, "children in the magical world are very important, because there are so few of us. Torture and anything that can damage a witch or wizards magical core, including physical torture, is one of the most extreme offenses in our society."

It often left Harry wondering about how Daphne's father had gotten away with abusing his daughter without getting caught. Of course, there was no evidence of his abuse from what Harry saw, but psychological abuse could be even more damaging than the kind that left physical evidence.

Granted, it was very hard to judge when a child was suffered from mental or emotional abuse. Most times, people wouldn't even realize a child had suffered under that kind of pressure until it was too late. Thinking along those lines, it stood to reason that no one had recognized the signs of a girl suffering under the yoke of her father's harsh demands and punishments.

And of course, there was Daphne herself. That girl was very strong, both mentally and physically. She was cold to most people, but that was

simply her acting as her father expected her to act. Her base personality, the one she hid from everyone, was incredibly kind and caring. So perhaps the reason he had never been caught was because Daphne showed no signs of abuse, much like Harry himself showed no signs of what he suffered at his relatives hands.

Neville breathed a sigh of relief at the words he was obviously hoping to hear, and Harry chuckled, before patting the boy's shoulder.

With nothing left to be said, the group of four marched across the cold grounds. The moon shone brightly overhead, though the cloud covering would occasionally block out the moonbeams shining down on them, leaving the group in darkness for several seconds. Several meters ahead, Harry could see the light from Hagrid's hut.

"Is that you, Filch? Hurry up, I want ter get started."

Everyone turned to see Hagrid coming out of the darkness, Fang at his heels. Harry immediately took notice of the cross bow the giant of a man carried, as well as the quiver full of arrows slung over his shoulder. His eyes narrowed.

"Bout time you showed up," Hagrid said as soon as he was near them, "been waitin for yeh. Alright there, Harry, Neville?"

Harry breathed a slight sigh of relief, the tension in his back easing. He was very glad that Hagrid was not upset at him for essentially browbeating the man into giving up his pet dragon. It would not be good to have detention with a man who was upset with him, especially since said man was currently carrying a weapon.

"I wouldn't get too friendly with them if I were you, Hagrid," Filch said in his crotchety voice. "This is supposed to be punishment."

"Ah, poppycock," Hagrid waved off the man's words, "It's punishment enough to be goin' inter the Forbidden Forest."

"The Forbidden Forest?" Neville's face suddenly paled, causing Harry to frown and put a supportive hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I thought the Forbidden Forest was off limits," he said, directing his question toward Hagrid, since the giant man was infinitely more pleasant than the disgusting Filch any day. "Why are we going in there when it's not allowed?"

"They've made an exception for you three," Filch cackled, his voice harsh and grating. "That's what happens when you break the rules like you did."

"Put a sock in it, Filch," Hagrid grunted, making the caretaker scowl at him. "Yer bein' allowed inter the forest because I need help with somethin'."

"Well then," Harry stated, as if the man's words answered all of his questions. "What are we waiting for?"

"I'll be back at dawn," said Filch, "for what's left of them," he added nastily, turned and started back toward the castle, his lamp bobbing away in the darkness.

Malfoy now turned to Hagrid.

"I'm not going in that forest," he said with a quiver in his voice. Harry wrinkled his nose in disgust. The boy was not only a bully, but like all bullies, he was also a coward. He never did anything unless he was secure in the knowledge no one would harm him.

"Yeh are if yeh want ter stay at Hogwarts," said Hagrid fiercely. "Yeh've done wrong an' now yeh've got ter pay fer it."

"But this is servant stuff, it's not for students to do. I thought we'd be copying lines or something, if my father knew I was doing this—"

"He'd tell yer that's how it is at Hogwarts," Hagrid growled. "Copyin' lines! What good's that ter anyone? Yeh'll do summat useful or Yeh'll get out. If yeh think yer father'd rather you were expelled, then get back off ter the castle an' pack. Go on."

Malfoy stood there for a good few seconds, looking at Hagrid with a furious expression. It didn't last long, and a few moments later, he dropped his face to the ground.

"Right then," said Hagrid, "now, listen carefully, 'cause it's dangerous what we're gonna do tonight, an' I don' want no one takin' risks. Follow me over here a moment."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the man's words. If what Hagrid was doing was so dangerous, why were they allowing three first years to accompany him?

He led them to the very edge of the forest. Holding his lamp up high, he pointed down a narrow, winding earth track that disappeared into the thick black trees. A light breeze lifted their hair as they looked into the forest.

"Look there," said Hagrid, "see that stuff shinin' on the ground? Silvery stuff? That's unicorn blood. There's a unicorn in there bin hurt badly by summat. This is the second time in a week. I found one dead last Wednesday. We're gonna try an' find the poor thing. We might have ter put it out of its misery."

"And what if whatever hurt the unicorn finds us first?" asked Malfoy, his voice shaking. Harry could hear the fear in it. A part of him couldn't help but relish in the boy's fear, while another part was disgusted with himself for taking joy in another's fear.

"There's nothin' that lives in the forest that'll hurt yeh if yer with me or Fang," said Hagrid. "An' keep ter the path. Right, now, we're gonna split inter two parties an' follow the trail in diff'rent directions. There's blood all over the place, it must've bin staggerin' around since last night at least."

"Are you sure splitting up is the best idea?" asked Harry, forestalling anyone else from speaking. "I mean, if there is something dangerous in the forest, then splitting up is probably the worst thing we could do."

Hagrid actually looked surprised for a moment. It didn't last, and the giant man dismissed Harry's words.

"This is the best way. We need ter split up so we can follow each trail."

"In that case, I'll go with Fang and Draco, while Neville goes with you," Harry determined. Draco paled.

"I don't want to go anywhere with you," the boy said, his pitch a decimal higher than normal. Harry gave him a bone chilling smile.

"Well, that's too bad, Draco," Harry said in a pleasant voice that made the blond Slytherin shudder. "Because I want to go with you and make sure you don't run out on us... or hex someone in the back."

"Yeh sure yeh want Fang, Harry?" asked Hagrid, "He's a bleedin' coward."

Draco went significantly paler, a feat Harry had not thought possible. He just smiled.

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Harry reassured the man.

"Right then. So me an' Neville'll go one way, an' Draco, Harry, an' Fang'll go the other. Now, if any of us finds the unicorn, we'll send up green sparks, right? Get yer wands out an' practice now—that's it—an' if anyone gets in trouble, send up red sparks, an' we'll all come an' find yeh—so, be careful—let's go."

The Forbidden Forest was incredibly dark and ominously silent. Harry was not sure what he should have expected, but he had not been expecting it to be so quiet. There were always animals in the forest, at night there were Owls and small mammals, bats and bugs, more than enough animals to create a symphony of nature. Here there was nothing, almost like they all knew something dangerous was lurked about and had cleared out.

Several meters after they entered the forest the group split up. Hagrid and Neville went one way, Harry and Malfoy the other.

They walked mostly in silence. Harry kept one eye on Malfoy at all times and the other on the area ahead. The ground around them was sparsely lit as the moon's rays shone through the dense canopy of trees, creating strangely organic pattern on the ground. Harry could see glints of silvery liquid splattered across various parts of the earth. Unicorn blood, he realized.

"Hold up," Harry ordered, making Draco stop as he knelt down to inspect

the blood. The blond Slytherin looked frightened, but tried to hide it behind a sneer.

"Listen you, I don't take orders from—"

"*Malfoy*," Harry spoke in a calm, soft tone that was even more frightening than his angry hiss. Draco Malfoy shuddered. "You will do as I tell you or I will ensure that the next 'lesson' I teach will be much more painful than your last one."

"You can't do that," Malfoy squeaked, his voice cracking, "If you do, I'll tell my father and you'll be expelled."

"Only if I leave evidence that I was the one doing it." Harry smiled coldly. "Last time I got caught on purpose. The next time I decide you need more education there will be no evidence, and you can't convict someone without evidence. Now do me a favor and shut up."

Malfoy looked like read to complain some more, but a cold glare with a lethal smile from Harry had the boy snapping his mouth closed almost painfully.

With the boy now silent, Harry turned his attention back to the Unicorn blood. He dipped two fingers into it, taking quick note as to how sticky the substance was. As he stretched his fingers, the blood stretched with it, much different from human blood, thicker.

Standing beside him, Draco crinkled his nose. Harry ignored him.

"This blood is fresh," Harry said with a frown. "At least I think it's fresh. It's not dried and not yet coagulated, meaning this blood was spilled recently. Within the last hour at least." He stood up. "That means we're on the right path."

Just then, Harry heard something rustling near them. It sounded like some kind of fabric trailing across the ground. A cloak perhaps?

"Get down!" Harry hissed towards Draco, who heeded his warning and crouched down. Fang cowered beside them both.

"What? What it is?" Draco's fear was an almost palpable thing. While Harry could not see the boy very well, he could almost imagine the pale face and wide, frightened eyes the blond boy sported.

"I heard something," Harry looked around with narrowed eyes. "Over by those trees. Follow me and keep quiet."

He began walking toward the area he'd heard the noise, his feet making nary a sound. Behind him, Malfoy walked along with no sense of subtlety or grace at all. If something came after them, it would be the boy's fault.

Harry frowned as he strained his ears in the hopes of hearing something. He thought about reinforcing them, but decided it wasn't worth the risk of possibly blowing out his eardrums.

He wished he had mastered his animagus form for this. If he could do a partial transformation for at least his eyes so he could see in the dark things would be much easier. He thought about casting *lumos*, but decided that if there *was* something dangerous out there, giving away his position anymore than Draco already had would be a bad idea.

Roving beside him on all fours, Fang whined softly, and Harry patted him on the head to keep him quiet.

He heard the rustling again, and this time Draco must have heard it as well, because the boy whimpered. Harry ignored the blond for now, and instead focused on where the sound was coming from. The rustling was getting louder now, and it was accompanied by another sound, a pained whine that Harry recognized as a horse. It looked like they had found their Unicorn, and whatever was after the Unicorn had found it.

With a quick gesture behind him, Harry ordered Malfoy to stop. The boy did so, too afraid to do anything else, and Harry silently crept up to the nearest tree.

Pressing his back against the bark, he peeked out from around the trunk.

There, in a very small clearing among the trees, was the Unicorn. It lay on its side, still alive if the soft whinnying noise and shuddering was any indication. Silver blood leaked from wounds on its hide, creating a thick

puddle on the forest floor.

And crouched down next to it was the... thing that had injured it. Harry could not even begin to guess as to the creature's origins. Covered in a long, black cloak, a large hood pulled up over its head, Harry could make nothing of its face or features.

Not that he would be able to see its face anyway. Currently, the thing's face was buried into the hide of the Unicorn, sucking up its blood with loud, lewd slurping noises.

Harry felt a moment of intense nausea well up inside of him. There was something unnatural about the scene before him. He knew that death was a part of life, and he knew it was in the nature of predators to hunt prey, but this... this was not a part of the natural world. Whatever this creature was, it was doing something that it had no right doing.

It was enough to make him sick.

A crunch sounded beside him. Harry whirled around, his wand out and a curse on his lips, only for it to die out when he saw Draco and Fang standing beside him.

"What the hell are you two doing?" he hissed, angry that this brat decided to ignore his orders to stay put.

"You're not the boss of me," Draco said much more loudly than he probably intended. The thing that had been feasting on the Unicorn must have heard him as well, for the loud slurping noises abruptly ceased.

Harry paled.

"Cast the sparks," Harry ordered, "Cast the sparks now and then get as far away from here as possible. Find Hagrid."

"What?"

"Just do it!"

Harry didn't bother to see if Draco listened to him. Already he could hear

the rustling of fabric getting closer to their location. The creature, whatever it was, was coming for them.

Pressing his back against the tree, Harry did his best to calm his breathing. He needed a clear head. He needed to be able to think, and come up with some kind of plan to stall this thing until Hagrid arrived.

Harry quickly formulated a plan within his mind. He could run, of course, but there was no guarantee it wouldn't catch him. It had caught a Unicorn, after all.

That left just one option. Strike hard, strike fast. It was really the only thing he could think of doing; he had no information on what he was dealing with. With this in mind, Harry sprang out from behind the tree, the creature much closer now, only about two meters or so Harry judged, and slashed his wand down in a vicious stroke.

"Diffindo!"

The cutting curse launched itself from his wand, traveling toward the creature with pinpoint accuracy. Harry put a good bit of power into that curse. While he wasn't sure it would kill the thing, he was at least positive it would do a good deal of damage.

It probably would have done a good deal of damage had it hit. Barely a foot from where the creature stood, a blue barrier of arcane energy was erected. A *Protego*, Harry recognized. His spell splashed against the shield, causing small tendrils of magic to jump and sizzle along its surface like an electric current. The shield held.

Harry's eyes widened. This wasn't some kind of animalistic beast! This was a wizard!

Pain erupted in Harry's scar at the same time a bright yellow light shot from a wand the wizard now held in their hand. Harry ignored the pain, having dealt with much worse before, and dodged the attack by sidestepping it. The spell, a spell he did not recognize, flew passed and splashed against the tree, where it began to sizzle and hiss as the bark literally melted off like wax.

Harry made a note not to get hit by that spell.

The battle continued; Harry dodged another spell, the same one as last time. It was difficult to think and act with the building pressure in his head. His scar was burning hot, messing with his concentration.

He rolled along the ground as a bright blue blast of energy was launched at him. It exploded on a tree several feet away, blowing out large chunks of bark. As Harry got to his feet, he jabbed his wand at the wizard and launched his own spell.

"Reducto!"

A blue ball of condensed energy blasted from the tip of his wand. It careened toward the figure who brought up another *Protego* to block the spell. Harry's wand was already moving again as he performed the only spell chain he currently knew.

"Tarantallegra! Expelliamus! Locomotor mortis! Reducto!"

The chain was actually one Harry had created himself. The first spell was designed to make his opponent underestimate him. The second would disarm him of his wand. The third would immobilize him. And the fourth, depending on how much energy Harry put into the spell, would either blast his enemy backwards or turn them into a fine paste.

Harry had put quite a bit of energy into his *reducto*.

Unfortunately, none of the spells got through. The first was swatted away with ease. The second was blocked with a *protego*. The third did not even hit, as a large stone rose to intercept the attack, and the fourth was blocked by another application of the shield charm. None of Harry's attacks made it through.

A curse escaped Harry's lips as he realized this person was a lot better than him. He may not be more powerful than Harry, though Harry had no way of knowing for sure, but he certainly knew his spells better than Harry did, and could use them to much greater effect.

Harry was beginning to wish he had managed to learn how to

nonverbalize his offensive spells.

Another yellow curse was launched at Harry, who ducked behind a tree, wincing as the bark fizzled and spit from the damage done to it. The spell must create some kind of acid, he realized as he saw the effects of the curse up close. The bark was literally being eaten through.

Harry took a deep breath, adrenaline pumping through his veins as he prepared his next move. This cover wouldn't last much longer if the wizard continued throwing spells like that. He needed to make a dash for more cover, maybe see if he couldn't find some higher ground, a hill or something. Perhaps he could even find a way to utilize the terrain to his advantage. He would need to be quick and move constantly so as to present a harder target to hit.

Before Harry could so much as move an inch from his spot, the tree he was hiding behind exploded violently. Harry was flung away like a rag doll caught in a maelstrom. He hit the ground hard, the impact jarring his bones with incredible force. He began to roll along the ground, his robes catching and tearing on some of the sharper branches and rocks dotting the forest floor.

Moving with the tumble Harry tried to minimize the damage when his left shoulder smacked against the root of a tree. He stifled back a scream of pain as joint dislocated. Not that he would have been able to scream, for a second later his back hit a large tree, hard.

Harry felt all of the breath leave his lungs in a loud '*whoosh*' of air. Spots appeared before his eyes. His head was ringing. It hurt, maybe not as much as when the troll crushed him, but it was enough to leave him disoriented.

As Harry tried to catch his breath, the sound of rustling and footsteps reached his ears. Looking up, Harry felt all of the blood drain from his face as the wizard coming toward him. Unicorn blood dribbled down its front, staining the ground as it dripped off its robes, creating a ghastly image like something out of one of those horror movies Lisa made him watch on occasion.

He could see now why she crawled into his bed every time they watched

one.

The pain that erupted in his scar was nothing compared to the fear he felt at this being who had so thoroughly defeated him. For the first time since he was a young boy, Harry found himself afraid.

He tried to push through his fear. Tried to push it to the side, knowing that if he did not, this monster in wizard's robes would surely kill him. Snatching his wand from where it lay by his head, Harry scrambled to his feet and prepared once more to fight.

The wizard paused in its walk, head tilting to the side. Harry could see nothing beyond the hood, and could not even begin to figure out what his opponent was thinking, but it almost looked curious. Not that he cared. If it was distracted, then maybe he would get lucky and hit it with a spell before it could retaliate.

Before Harry could do anything, something else burst into the clearing. Something Harry never thought he would see. The bottom half was that of a palomino horse with four strong, hooved legs, and a tail swaying from its hind end. The upper half was human. He had white blond hair and bright blue eyes. A centaur.

Before the wizard Harry faced could even begin to turn, the centaur had galloped over to them quicker than the wind. It reared up on its hind legs, attacking with its front. The wizard raised an arm to protect itself, a reflexive gesture, and if the loud cracking was any indication, received a broken arm for their troubles. Harry thought he heard a cry of pain from the wizard, but with the blood pounding in his ears it was hard to tell.

The wizard fled then, disappearing into the night, and the centaur moved to stand beside him.

"Are you alright?" the centaur asked.

"I—yes," Harry answered, "I'm fine. Thank you for, well, you know."

What Harry wanted to say was 'thank you for saving me,' however, for some reason he couldn't. It may have had something to do with the shame he felt. Harry always prided himself on being strong, on being

independent, and most of all, on being able to take care of himself. That he had needed someone to rescue him was galling, and he couldn't help but feel pathetic and weak.

Harry promised himself that the next time he was in danger like this, he would not be so helpless.

And then all thoughts fled him as his mind registered the fact that he and the centaur were not the only creature's here.

"The Unicorn!"

Despite the exhaustion he felt from the adrenaline leaving his body, Harry sped toward the small clearing where the Unicorn lay. It did not take long to reach, despite having been distracted by the battle, he remembered where it was. All he had to do was follow the path of destruction.

The Unicorn was still there, only it wasn't moving. Harry knelt down, unsure of what to do. He put a hand to its neck to see if it was still breathing. It wasn't.

"No," Harry whispered as he felt a sense of despondency enter his soul.
"No, no, no, no!"

Harry pointed his wand at the Unicorn, the tip glowing green. He didn't know any healing spells aside from basic first aid. Instead, Harry simply infused his will to heal the Unicorn into his wand. He pushed his desire to see the Unicorn alive and healthy into his magic.

Nothing happened. The Unicorn remained dead.

"No, oh god, no."

Harry felt an ache within his chest, something he had never felt before. It was as if someone had taken a hammer to his heart and crushed it. It was a horrible feeling, and he couldn't even begin to understand why he felt this way.

"Come on, dammit!"

Headless of the tears beginning to sting his eyes, Harry continued trying to heal the dead Unicorn. He pushed more and more magic into his wand. The runes running along the shaft glowed brilliantly within the darkness of the forest.

"There is nothing you can do, Harry Potter," the centaur said from behind him. "Her death was written in the stars."

"Shut up!" Harry snarled, not turning from his self appointed task. "You don't know anything! I'm not going to let her die!"

The centaur just looked at him sadly, not saying anything. Harry ignored him, focusing everything he had on the task of healing the Unicorn. It was a task that was done in vain, the Unicorn was dead, had been since sometime during his fight with the strange wizard. Despite this, Harry pushed more and more magic until the tip of his wand sparked with bursts of arcane energy.

And then the glow began to die down. Harry Potter felt himself grow weaker as he spent what was left of his magic attempting to do the impossible.

Tired, spent magically, physically and emotionally, Harry collapsed against the Unicorn, trying vainly to keep himself from crying.

"Why does it hurt so much?" he asked, not actually expecting an answer. He received one, however, from the centaur who stood beside him.

"Unicorns are the purest creature's in existence," the centaur told him, "When one of them dies, those who are pure of heart feel that death within their very souls."

If Harry were not so drained he would have snorted. Him? Pure? Harry was many things, but pure of heart was not one of them. He knew his own short comings better than anyone. He was prideful, and some would even call him vain. On occasion he could also be ruthless and cold, as was the case with Draco Malfoy. And while he showed kindness, compassion and understanding to his friends, he had no trouble using others for his own gains, as shown by how he treated the vast majority of his peers. No, Harry was not pure, not in the least.

So then, why did the Unicorn's death hurt so much?

He did not ask the centaur. He suspected the horse man did not have the answers he sought.

"I'm sorry," he said instead, pushing himself off the white mane of the deathly still Unicorn. He wiped his eyes with his sleeves and used what little magic he had left to dry and clean his face. Harry had already shown enough weakness today; he would not show any more. "I didn't mean to snap at you."

"It is alright," the centaur said, "I understand how difficult it is for one so young to witness the death of something so beautiful."

Harry felt a stab in his chest, but ignored it in favor of changing the subject. He had no wish to stay on the topic of the unicorn's death.

"Do you know who that was? The... the thing that was drinking the Unicorn's blood?"

The centaur regarded him silently for a moment, and Harry couldn't help but feel that he was being judged.

"Harry Potter, do you know what unicorn's blood is used for?"

"No," Harry frowned, "I've not found any references on the use of Unicorn's blood in my studies. And the only thing I've dealt with in potions is unicorn hair and ground unicorn horn."

"That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn," said the centaur. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."

"But, surely no one can be that desperate?" Harry felt something constricting his chest. "Who would possibly want to live such a life? Death would be preferable! Unless..." Harry trailed off, his eyes widening. "Unless whoever it is, is after the Philosophers Stone. With the elixir of

live they could undo any damage they suffered from drinking unicorn's blood." His expression turned pensive. "But that still doesn't explain *who* would do such a thing."

"Can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?"

The constricting feeling around his heart tightened, and suddenly, everything made sense. The way his scar burned when he faced the person under the robes, the troll that had been released in the castle, the break in at Gringotts, and the reason the Philosopher's Stone had been moved here in the first place. It all made sense.

"Voldemort," Harry breathed, "But he's dead, isn't he?"

He had to be dead. There was no way he could have survived having the killing curse launched back at him.

Or had it? Harry did not know what happened after the green killing curse struck him. He had passed out from the pain moments after it happened. Was it possible that the curse had not killed Voldemort, but merely left him significantly weakened, to the point where he would need a powerful artifact like the Philosopher's Stone to bring him back?

The centaur looked like he was about to answer, but before he could a shout of, "Harry!" caused their attention to turn.

Hagrid and Neville were running toward him, both looking like they were out of breath.

"Harry! Are you—Merlin!"

Neville took one look at the dead unicorn laying on the ground, and proceeded to lose whatever was left of his dinner. Hagrid looked on the verge of tears as he saw the once pure creature lying still, dead to the world. Of course a man who loved magical creatures would be affected by the death of a unicorn.

As Hagrid hurried over to examine the unicorn and Neville dry heaved on the ground, the centaur turned to Harry.

"This is where I leave you, Harry Potter," he said as Hagrid bent down to examine the unicorn's wounds, "You are safe now."

"I didn't get your name," Harry said before the centaur could leave.

"It's Firenze."

"Firenze," Harry tested the word before offering the centaur a small bow of gratitude, "It was nice to meet you."

"And you as well, Harry Potter," Firenze nodded to him before he turned and trotted off into the forest.

As Firenze disappeared into the darkness of the forest, Harry turned to the scene around him, Hagrid examining the unicorn, Neville now longer dry heaving but shivering instead. Harry couldn't blame him; it wasn't a very pretty sight.

Draco Malfoy and Fang were nowhere to be seen.

He walked over and placed a hand on the round-faced boy's shoulder.

"You alright, Neville?" he asked.

"Not... particularly," Neville gasped out, and Harry couldn't help but nod.

"It's not a very pretty site, is it?" Harry asked softly, almost as if he were speaking to himself.

Neville didn't say anything, just nodding in agreement. Over by the unicorn, Hagrid stood and made his way over to Harry and Neville and, after asking Harry about what happened, the raven-haired boy was forced to give the two a recounting of his encounter with the wizard he'd fought, the one who'd been drinking unicorn's blood.

He did not tell them that Voldemort was the one he fought. Nor did he make any hint of the Philosopher's Stone being the reason for the Dark Lord's presence here. Harry was still reeling from the knowledge, and he could only imagine the kind of panic such knowledge would insight. Besides, the centaurs would probably tell Hagrid, or at least, Firenze

would. And there was no need to inform Neville that the darkest wizard in the world was currently hiding within the forbidden forest.

Later that night, as Harry lay in bed, his mind wandered back to his encounter with Voldemort. For a man who was supposed to be half-dead, he had been awfully good at dueling. And that man was after the Philosopher's Stone. The thought of Voldemort rising again was not a pleasant one.

And yet, despite his worry about the man who had taken his parents from him rising again, Harry could not help but wonder if there was some way he could turn this situation to his advantage.

I have now surpassed Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix in sheer word count, which is the longest of the seven books. I don't know if that's an accomplishment or not, but I do feel pretty good.

I hope I did a good job in showing another side of Harry. One thing I think people tend to forget when reading this story is that while Harry is, in many ways, a young man in the skin of a child, he is also still very much a child in some ways. The consequence of growing up too fast is that people who do are often left unbalanced in some way. For Harry that is an emotional unbalance. He doesn't really understand emotions as well as he thinks he does, reading books on psychology only get you so far, and because of that often cannot understand why he feels a certain way when placed in a specific situation.

There are two more chapters after this story before Harry Potter and the Gift of Memories comes to a close. Before you all get your panties in a twist, please go back to chapter 18 and reread the A/N.

And remember, if you have any questions, comments, critiques, or your place of residence is currently suffering from a zombie apocalypse, please leave it in a review.

Thank you for reviewing this story, and have an awesome day.

Down the Trap Door

Down the Trap Door

"Ok, Mister Potter, I want you to turn this mouse into a snuffbox," Professor McGonagall told Harry as he stood within the room where the Transfiguration practical test was taking place. It was nearing the end of the school year, which meant it was time for the end of the year exams. So far they had taken all of their written tests and were now doing their practical exams, which called for students to show how well they could execute all they were taught this year.

Harry Potter nodded and focused on the tiny white mouse that stood on all fours on his desk, pleased that he could now concentrate completely on his spell casting. His scar no longer burned from his run in with Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest, though it had taken several nights of meditation and a number of horrible nightmares in which his failure to save the unicorn had been mixed in with his mother's death, before the burning in his scar left him. He felt much better now, and his concentration was back to 100 percent.

Pointing his wand at the mouse, Harry conjured the image of what he wanted the tiny mammal to turn into within his mind. He imagined it shifting, transforming, changing from one thing to another, and as his mind focused on this image, his will invoked his magic into action and the mouse before him changed.

The small, four legged mammal morphed, its form shifting and taking on a new shape. First it changed color, going from white to molten silver. Then it began to change shape, its body flowing like quicksilver as it lengthened and elongated and flattened and expanded. It took the general shape of a rectangle exactly six inches wide, three inches long, and one inch tall. The snuffbox's edges became soft, rounded. A centimeter thick border with intricate patterns drawn onto it protruded from the box.

Diamond shaped patterns began forming on the body, and within each

diamond was an animal; a badger, a lion, a raven, and a snake that formed a repeating pattern. In the center of the lid for the snuffbox was the Hogwarts crest along with the Hogwarts motto: *Draco Dormiens Nunquam Titillandus*. Never Tickle a Sleeping Dragon.

The entire transfiguration took only a few seconds.

"Here you are, Professor," Harry smiled as he showed off the snuffbox to a stunned Professor McGonagall, who stood there, blinking as she stared at the beautifully crafted box on the table. He was pleased to see that despite her knowledge of his talent, he could still shock his Head of House with his ability.

Of course, if she knew how far along he *really* was in Transfiguration she would probably die of a heart attack.

The stern Transfiguration professor shook herself out of her stupor walked toward the snuffbox, examining it and trying—and only partially succeeding—to not gawk at the object now being held within her hands.

"This is... very good, Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall said at last, her voice sounding slightly choked in shock. Harry smiled. "Tell me, are these diamonds?"

Harry looked at the small crystal-like gem encrusted points of each diamond pattern on the snuffbox. He shook his head.

"No. Gamp's Law doesn't allow for the transfiguration of diamonds, being a precious gem." He smiled at Professor McGonagall. "Though I suspect you already knew that." Her answering smile let him know he was right. "Those are quartz crystals, one of the few gems that can be transfigured due to their composition. I simply added my own personal touch to them in order to make them look like diamonds."

"You changed the composition of the quartz to mimic the looks of a diamond?" she asked for clarification.

"Yes."

"This is excellent work, Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall said after

several more minutes of examination. "I have never seen such an intricately done transfiguration from a first year. Not even your father was this good when he started out."

Harry beamed at the praise. It was nice knowing he had surpassed his father in the branch of magic the man had been best in. He held onto the firm belief that it was the job of the next generation to surpass those of the older generation, so knowing that he was well on his way to surpassing his father left him feeling a sense of accomplishment. It also made him hope that his father, where ever he was, was watching him with pride.

With his last exam for the day done, Harry made his way out of the castle and toward the Black Lake, where he and his friends had decided to meet after they finished their exams.

It was a very warm day, a sign that summer was coming. The sun bore down on the grounds of Hogwarts without any clouds in sight to obscure its unforgiving rays. Harry shed his robes to reveal his clothes: blue jeans and a white t-shirt underneath, as he made his way over to the Black Lake.

A few of his friends were already there. Daphne Greengrass was sitting along the shore, her feet planted firmly on the ground, knee bent as she wrapped both arms around her legs and stared out across the lake. Beside her sat Tracey Davis and Terry Boot, who looked like they were arguing about something. Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott lounged on the grass next to them, eyes closed as if they were sleeping.

Harry walked over to catch the tail end of the conversation between Terry and Tracey.

"... I'm telling you, Puddlemere United is a much better team than the Bellycastle Bats. They've won the British and Irish league twenty-two times *and* they won the European Cup twice," Tracey told the brown haired boy. "The Bellycastle Bats have never won the European Cup."

"But the Bellycastle Bats have won the British and Irish League twenty-seven times," Terry pointed out, "and Puddlemere United is older by several hundred years, so they've had more chances to play at the

European Cup."

"Yeah, well," Tracey scrunched up her nose, "The members on Puddlemere United have better brooms."

As Harry sat next to Daphne, the blond-haired Slytherin sighing as she continued listening to the argument.

"I take it they've been at this for a while?" Harry asked.

"Since they got here," Daphne confirmed. She turned her head to look at him, one hand coming up to finger a lock of her bangs, which she tucked behind her ear. "Done with your tests?"

"Yes."

"How did you do?"

"Satisfactory," Harry said, "the exams weren't difficult. Though I think I did exceptionally well in Transfiguration. And yourself?"

"About as good as can be expected," Daphne said. Harry nodded and took that to mean she aced most of her tests. Daphne Greengrass was an exceptionally talented witch; intelligent and gifted in many aspects of magic. Though not as skilled in Potions or Transfiguration as she was other branches such as Charms and DADA, she still excelled in both.

"I suspect you probably ranked very high in our year," Harry said, "most likely third or fourth for the entire year." Daphne nodded, but didn't say anything. Harry understood, she probably didn't want to think about school since their testing finished.

"Oh, Harry!" Tracey said as she just noticed his presence. The loud words caused Susan and Hannah to wake up from their half-slumber, and for Terry to look behind him to see Harry sitting next to Daphne. "When did you get here?"

"A while ago," Harry answered, "you were so busy arguing about Quidditch and brooms that you didn't notice."

Tracey huffed at the small dig on her broom obsession, while Hannah giggled into her hand and Terry smirked. Daphne's lips twitched ever so slightly, amused to see someone else taking her best friend to task on her fanaticism with flying.

"Whatever," Tracey muttered under her breath, "prat."

"So, Harry, how do you think you did?" asked Hannah as she pushed herself into a sitting position and placed her hands on the ground behind her back. Harry grinned and gave the same answer he gave Daphne.

"Satisfactory."

Tracey rolled her eyes.

"Meaning he probably aced each test. I don't know how you're so bloody smart when I never see you study. Merlin's beard, I never even see you do your homework! But you always manage to turn it in on time."

"I'm an early riser," Harry shrugged, "I get up so early that I do most of my studying before everyone else is up."

"Ugh, great," Tracey sighed, "Another early bird. It's bad enough Daphne wakes up so early, now I've got to deal with you too."

"And what's so bad about getting up early?" asked Daphne, raising a single, delicate eyebrow.

"How about everything?" Tracey fired. "I just don't get it. Why would you possibly want to get up early when you could be getting more beauty sleep."

"Habit," Harry explained.

"I don't need more beauty sleep," Daphne said at the same time. The two looked at each other for a moment, amused.

Tracey shook her head.

"You guys really are two of a kind, you know that?"

Harry released a mild chuckle while Daphne tried not to smirk.

More of their friends began appearing. Blaise came first. He walked up to them and sat down next to Tracey, who immediately engaged the boy in conversation. Though the term conversation may have been incorrect. Tracey did all the talking. After Blaise came Neville Longbottom, who looked pleased with himself.

"I think the only subject I did poorly on was Transfiguration," he said when Hannah asked how he did. "I just couldn't get the snuffbox to look right."

"I had that problem too," the blond Hufflepuff admitted. "Mine had a tail." She cast a look over to her red-haired friend. "Though I'm pretty sure Susan got good marks. She's really good at Transfiguration." Said girl looked demurely at the ground beneath them, cheeks tinted pink at the praise.

Lisa was the second to last of their friends to arrive. She sat on Harry's immediate left and gave the group a smile.

"So how did our little history buff do?" asked Harry. Lisa rolled her eyes while Hannah snickered into her hand and Tracey laughed loudly. The others did not react anywhere near as obvious, but it was easy to tell they were amused.

"You like history just as much as I do, you know," Lisa pointed out with a smile. Harry shrugged as she blew several bangs out of her face. "I did well, I think. I'm pretty sure I did better on the written portion than I did the practicals."

"Just like a Ravenclaw to do good on a written test," Tracey spoke before her mind could keep her mouth from opening.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" asked Lisa at the same time as Terry said, "There's nothing wrong with being a good test taker."

"Urk," Tracey grimaced as she quickly started backpedaling, "there's nothing wrong with being good at taking tests. I was just saying, you know, because I suck at written exams."

"And writing essays," Daphne couldn't help but add dryly.

Tracey nodded.

"And writing essays."

"And anything that involves studying."

"Yes and—wait, no!" Tracey glared at her friend. "You take that back. I am good at studying!"

Daphne replied in the same dry and sarcastic tone she always spoke in when amongst her friends. "Could have fooled me."

Tracey flushed.

"Fine. So I'm not very good at studying either, but I am good at learning spells. That's gotta count for something, right?" She asked. When her best friend merely gave her a pointed look, Tracey huffed and crossed her arms, muttering something about no good best friends not sticking up for her when they should.

Lisa shook her head and continued after that small interruption. "Though I think I did pretty good on the Charms test. Transfiguration was alright, but I messed up a bit on my snuffbox. The color was a little off."

"At least yours didn't have a tail," Tracey said, causing Hannah to send the brunette Slytherin a look of mild annoyance.

"We can't all be perfect at our practicals, you know," she said with a huff, causing Tracey to flush as she once more engaged her mouth without engaging her brain. Daphne shook her head at her friend's extraordinary capacity for speaking before thinking.

"Smooth, Trace, real smooth."

The group continued to talk for several more minutes, laughing and enjoying each others company as they waited for the last member of their group. However, when the person in question did not show up after nearly fifteen minutes, Neville voiced the thoughts of everyone else.

"I wonder where Hermione is. I'm pretty sure the first year tests are all done. She should be here by now."

Harry frowned, wondering the exact same thing.

"I don't—"

"Harry!"

Everyone turned at the sound of Harry's name being called to see none other than Hermione Granger running up to them. Tracey began waving and looked ready to shout her standard greeting when Daphne elbowed her in the side. The girl sent her blond friend a glare.

"What was that for?"

"Look."

Daphne once more pointed towards Hermione. Namely, the expression on the girl's face. She had seen what Harry saw. The look of panic and slight hysteria. Harry hadn't seen that expression on anyone since the troll incident, making him wonder just what could cause such a look to appear now. Knowing Hermione, he wouldn't be surprised if it had something to do with her messing up on her exams.

"Harry! There's trouble! Professor Snape is going after the Philosopher's Stone tonight!"

And there went any and all theories Harry had. He blinked.

"What?"

"The Stone! The Philosopher's Stone! Snape is after it! He's going to go after it tonight!"

With each word that left Hermione's mouth, Harry was almost sure his jaw dropped more and more. Not even his talent at Occlumency could keep the feeling of absolute shock from his features. He was pretty sure that if he looked at himself in the mirror, he would be ashamed at how much of his composure he'd lost.

Fortunately, he was too busy reeling from what he'd just heard to be worried about his looks.

How did Hermione know about the Philosopher's Stone? Where had she heard about it? Harry had been very careful not to let any mention of the stone come up during conversation, yet somehow she still knew of its existence.

Harry needed more information before he could make any conclusions.

"Slow down, Hermione," he said sternly. "Take a deep breath, calm down." He watched as Hermione did as told, taking several deep gulps of air. When he felt she was sufficiently calm, he began again. "Now, why don't you start by telling me how you know about the Philosopher's Stone."

"After Snape tried to kill you by cursing your broom—"

"Here we go again," Tracey rolled her eyes.

"—I did some investigating," Hermione continued, determinedly ignoring Tracey. "I found out that Snape had been injured and he mentioned the third floor corridor and a dog and three heads and so I decided to go there and see what he was talking about and I saw the Cerberus and there was a trap door under it and so I began asking around to see what was hidden under the trap door but no one would tell me anything and then we met Hagrid and he seemed to have a fascination for magical creatures and so I asked him and told me that Fluffy was guarding something for a person called Flamel and—"

"Alright, alright." Harry held up a hand, getting her to stop. My gosh, this girl could talk. He had never heard anyone speak so much so quickly, and it was all in one sentence, too. "I think I understand now. Say no more."

Hermione took another deep breath, meanwhile the others stared at the girl like she'd grown six heads.

"I don't think I've ever heard anyone say so much in a single sentence," surprisingly, the words had not come from Tracey but from Terry, who

looked well and truly shocked. Harry guessed it had something to do with being well-learned in English. It may not have been in writing, but Hermione had just made the biggest run-on sentence Harry had ever heard.

Harry frowned and began piecing together how Hermione had figured out about the Philosopher's Stone. The first part was easy. She started snooping around after his broom was cursed and discovered Snape had gone to the third floor corridor, where he'd been bit by Fluffy after spying on him in a conversation with someone. The second part was easy enough as well. After discovering Hagrid's love of dangerous creatures, she had gone up to him and asked him about the Cerberus. Hagrid was simple person, and so he had unwittingly told Hermione about Nicholas Flamel. She was studious enough to discover the man's identity, if she hadn't already known. That left just one more question he needed an answer for.

"What makes you think Snape is going after the Stone tonight?"

"Because Professor Dumbledore's not here," Hermione answered. "He's away on Ministry business."

"And how do you know that?" asked Blaise before Harry could. It was rare to see the dark-skinned Slytherin so interested in something that he would break his silent disposition, but Harry guessed it was because Hermione was talking about his Head of House stealing something valuable.

"Because after my Transfiguration practical I asked Professor McGonagall if I could see Professor Dumbledore."

"Ok, so," Tracey began, "just to make sure I'm getting this right. You think Professor Snape is after the Philosopher's Stone, and is going to steal it tonight because Professor Dumbledore is currently at the Ministry."

Hermione nodded.

"Got it. One more question then?" A pause. Tracey's face scrunched up. "What the bloody hell is a Philosopher's Stone?"

Everyone stared at the girl like she'd sprouted tails from her hindquarters. Daphne released a weary sigh and palmed her face.

"What?" Tracey looked defensive as she saw the stares. "Do any of you know what a Philosopher's Stone is?"

"The Philosopher's Stone is a powerful magical artifact with the ability to transform any metal into pure gold and create the Elixir of Life, which is said to make any who drink it immortal," Lisa answered before anyone else could. Tracey and the others sans Harry gaped at her. "It was created by Nicholas Flamel in thirteen-eighty-five and is to this day still considered the height of Alchemical achievements."

"How do you know about Nicholas Flamel and the Philosopher's Stone?" Hermione's jaw looked ready to drop to the ground. It probably would have if it weren't attached to her face. "I spent months searching for that name!"

Lisa shrugged.

"You shouldn't be surprised. I love history, and the creation of the Philosopher's Stone was a pretty important piece of history in the thirteenth century. In fact, Nicholas Flamel's creation of the stone is what actually led to the Goblin Rebellion of fourteen-oh-two. You see, Flamel used the stone to create a lot of gold, and the goblins, wanting to control the flow of gold for themselves, attempted to kill Flamel and take it from him."

"So Hermione spent months searching for this Flamel guy when she could have just asked you," Tracey shook her head. "Man, talk about a tough break."

"I believe we're getting off topic," Harry said. "First off, if you know that Snape is going after the Stone, why are you telling me? Wouldn't it be better to tell the teachers? You know, like what you were trying to convince me to do to Draco Malfoy?"

Hermione flushed as her own actions were used against her.

"I told Professor McGonagall," she admitted quietly. "But she wouldn't

hear it. She told me that Professor Snape was a teacher and also charged with guarding the Stone. She said he wouldn't do anything and that I shouldn't concern myself with it." She looked at him imploringly, "But I know he's going after the Stone tonight. This is his only chance to get it."

"And just what do you expect me to do?" asked Harry.

"We can go after the Stone ourselves," Hermione suggested, causing many a shocked look to be sent her way. And they had a right to be. This was Hermione-follow-the-rules-to-the-letter-Granger after all. Harry doubted anyone would have suspected her to be capable of even thinking about breaking the rules, much less actually breaking them. "If we get it before he does, then he won't be able to take it. We can hide it somewhere until Professor Dumbledore gets back."

It was these words that finally caused Harry to realize why the Sorting Hat placed Hermione in Gryffindor. She might be intelligence, but she could be just as reckless as any lion.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," he said pensively.

"Why not?"

"For one, I'm just one person," Harry told her bluntly. "For another, Snape's a teacher. An adult. I'm not exactly sure how you expect me to best an adult."

"What if we all went?"

At the suggestion several of Harry's friends seemed excited; Tracey, in particular, appeared to be most enthusiastic. She seemed to think it would be like going on an extravagant adventure.

Of course, not everyone thought it was a good idea. Hannah and Susan seemed to think it would be better if they told their Head of House and let her deal with it.

Soon there was a divide between those who wanted to go and those who thought it better to tell the teachers. Blaise, Tracey and, surprisingly,

Daphne all thought going after the stone themselves was the best option, while Lisa wanted to tell Professor Flitwick and Terry was on the fence. In the end, Harry decided enough was enough.

"None of you are going to be going after the Stone," he told them. He received a number of disappointed and annoyed looks from those who wanted to go but ignored them. "Going after the Philosopher's Stone is far too dangerous. The Cerberus is likely only one of the protections there, and there's no telling how difficult they will be to get past."

"So not cool," Tracey muttered. Harry gave her a stern glare.

"Better to be alive and not cool then dead."

Hermione crossed her arms.

"Fine, if you don't want to go, I'll just go by myself."

Harry felt his jaw dropping. Was this girl serious? Did she honestly think she could get past all those enchantments on her own? Or was she bluffing?

"And I'll go too!" Tracey added with a grin.

One by one those who wanted to go sided with Hermione, and even those who didn't and thought they should tell a teacher, decided they would rather stick with their friends, then let them do something so dangerous alone.

Harry pinched the bridge of his nose and released a deep sigh.

"You're not going to let this go, are you?"

They shook their heads.

"Thought not." He closed his eyes to stem the coming headache. "Alright, we'll go after the Philosopher's Stone." Tracey Davis cheered loudly while the others smiled, even Susan and Hannah, who looked extremely nervous. "However," Harry added, causing them to silence themselves. "If we're going after the stone, then you guys have to listen to me. If I tell

you to do something, I don't want you hesitating or arguing with me. Got it?"

Harry received several nods. He sighed. This entire affair was going to give him a migraine, he just knew it.

"Ok then, we'll meet up on the third floor corridor tonight at exactly twelve o'clock. Just... try not to get caught, ok?"

XoX

Harry Potter did not go to bed that night. There wasn't much point when he would have to get up in a few hours anyway. Instead he lay on his bed, using the time offered him to practice his Occlumency. He believed he was improving, though without someone to test his skills, he couldn't say for sure.

Eventually, Harry's internal clock told him it was twelve o'clock, and he silently rose from the bed. Neville was also awake, and must have been just laying there as well, because he saw Harry rise and got up from his own. Together, the two crept past their sleeping roommates and made their way into the Gryffindor common room.

Hermione was waiting for them.

"Are you two ready?" she asked.

"Yes," Harry said while Neville nodded, seeming nervous. "I can't believe I'm actually going along with you guys on this."

Hermione frowned and crossed her arms.

"We've been over this already, Harry. Snape is after the Stone, and none of the teacher's believe us. There's no telling what he'll do if he gets his hands on it, so we have to get it before he does."

"Let's just hurry this up," Harry suggested with a defeated sigh.

"At least we're all doing this together," Neville suggested, trying to lighten the mood.

"Not helping, Nev."

The trio made their way to the third floor corridor rather easily. Thanks to Harry, Hermione also knew the disillusionment charm, and Harry could now disillusion more than a single object, so the three were all but invisible. When they reached the third floor corridor it was to find Blaise, Daphne, and Tracey already waiting for them in front of the closed door.

"Are you guys ready?" he asked as the disillusionment charm he'd cast disappeared.

"You bet we are." Tracey sounded excited. Harry was just thankful the girl kept her voice to a whisper.

"In that case, be ready," he warned them. "As soon as the others show up, we're going to start."

With that, Harry leaned himself against the wall next to the door and crossed his arms. His ears perked up as he heard a sound coming from the other side. It was not the snuffling growls of a Cerberus, but the beautiful melody of a harp and... snores?

"Have you three checked the room yet?" he asked of the three Slytherins. They shook their heads.

"The doors locked so we couldn't get in," Tracey informed him, face scrunched. "Why?"

Harry didn't answer as he turned to the door and brought out his wand. With a standard flick he cast *alohamora*, the unlocking charm, on the door. A soft click issued as the door unlocked, and Harry grabbed the handle and opened it.

Inside was the Cerberus, just as Harry expected. What he had not expected was for it to be sound asleep. Nor had he expected the trapdoor to already be open.

"Guys, it looks like... Snape has already gone down the trapdoor," Harry informed them, causing the others to look in.

"What should we do then?" asked Blaise while the others stood around nervously. "Do you think we should not wait for the others and go on ahead?"

"No," Harry said after a moments thought. "We'll wait at least five more minutes. If they're not here by then, we'll have one of us wait here and let them know what's happening. Until than, we wait."

They didn't have to wait long. A minute later Susan and Hannah came in Harry's invisibility cloak, which he lent them for this purpose. Lisa and Terry came a bit later.

"I still say this is a bad idea," Hannah muttered nervously after Harry explained that Snape was already inside. "We really shouldn't be doing this."

"I'm glad you think so," Harry said, causing Hannah to blink.

"You do?"

"Yes, because it means you've just volunteered yourself to go inform Professor Sprout." He looked from her to everyone else. "Do any of you know the *Redcuto* curse? Or the *Bombarda*?"

"I know the *Reducto*," Blaise informed him.

"As do I," said Daphne.

"I know both." Everyone turned to look at Susan with wide, stupified eyes. The redhead flushed and, in a quiet voice, said, "my Aunty is head of the DMLE, remember?"

"That would explain it," Tracey said, smacking her left fist into her right palm.

"I know the *Bombarda*," Terry added after Susan, "but I'm not that good with it."

Harry nodded to himself.

"And which of you knows the *Protego*?" he asked.

As it turned out, Blaise, Daphne and Susan knew the *Protego*, the shield charm. Harry already guessed this would be the case. Susan's aunt headed the DMLE, so it made sense for her to teach her niece defensive magic, and Blaise and Daphne were of pureblood nobility. They would have at least been taught a little about dueling as it was tradition, even if duels rarely happened outside of dueling competitions anymore.

Hermione looked more than a little put out that she did not know any of the spells mentioned.

"Ok then, here's how we're going to do this." Harry gathered his thoughts to form a plan. "Neville, I want you and Hermione to head to Professor McGonagall's office and inform her of what's happening." Hermione seemed on the verge of protest, but Harry sent her a glance that snapped her mouth shut with an audible clack. "I'm asking both of you to go because Hannah doesn't know the Disillusionment charm and neither does Neville, so I'm going to lend her my invisibility cloak."

Hermione still looked put out, but decided not to argue with him, something Harry was glad for.

"Lisa?" Harry turned to the blond Ravenclaw.

"I'm going to find Professor Flitwick, right?" she said, interpreting Harry's order before he could finish it. Harry just gave her a smile before turning to Tracey, who obviously realized what he was about to say. She did not look pleased.

"But I was hoping to go with you and the others to get the Stone," Tracey nearly whined.

"Tracey," Harry said in a strained voice. She must have noticed his reproachful tone, because her mouth shut quite quickly. "This is not a game. The person after the Philosopher's Stone, regardless of whether or not it is Snape, is obviously an incredibly dangerous individual. And that's not even going into whatever magics are protecting the Stone. To be perfectly honest, if I had my way, you would all forget about the Stone and head back into your common rooms."

Harry watched as his brunette friend shrunk under his piercing eyes.

"Since a number of you are not going to let this go, that's not happening," Harry continued, his eyes still as sharp as ever. "However, just because I have decided not to impede this... expedition, does not mean I'm going to let someone who is wholly unprepared for what we'll face and thinks this is some kind of adventure go after the Stone. You don't know any offensive spells capable of doing damage, and you don't know the shield charm. If you came along with us, you would only be a burden."

A sigh escaped his lips when he saw how downtrodden Tracey became. The girl seemed ready to cry. Some of the others, like Hannah, Hermione, Lisa and Neville, were shocked by his harsh words.

Guilt settled into Harry's gut as he realized he'd gone too far... again. Walking up to the sniffing girl, whose head was bent toward the ground, Harry placed a hand underneath her chin, ignoring her flinch, and raised her head up so he could look her in the eyes.

"I just don't want to lose you," Harry said softly. "We have no idea what's waiting for us down there, but considering what's hidden there, it's obviously going to be dangerous. Dangerous enough that it's likely to have defenses stronger than what could be found at Gringotts."

Harry had never been truly good at letting his emotions show, but he tried to for the sake of easing his friend's pain. He didn't know if he succeeded or not.

"You're my friend," he continued. "And I don't have so many of those that I would be willing to let one who can't defend herself be placed in danger if I could help it."

Tracey's eyes gazed into his, wide and vulnerable, seemingly searching for something within his emerald irises. After a moment or two, she sighed.

"Ok, I get it," she muttered, looking back down at the ground, her cheeks aflame. "I'll go and get Professor Snape." Tracey turned her head away from him and muttered a good-natured, "spoil sport," breaking the tension and causing Harry to chuckle.

"So, what should I do if Professor Snape isn't there?"

Harry knew what she was implying, and was honestly surprised she would imply it, since she clearly did not think Snape was responsible. Still, he had an answer for her, having planned for all eventualities.

"If Snape isn't there, then I want you to get Professor Sinistra."

"Professor Sinistra?" His answer earned more than a few raised eyebrows, and not just from Tracey. "Not Professor Quirrell?"

"No." Harry gave her an amused look. "Can you honestly see that man being capable of doing anything in this situation? The man's a bumbling, stuttering fool. He would probably faint if you told him someone was after the Stone."

Tracey laughed while Hannah, Lisa and Terry snickered. Blaise and Daphne hid their amusement behind smirks. Susan's small smile said all it needed to, and Hermione looked like someone just told her that she had breast cancer.

"I could definitely see that happening," Tracey grinned. "Ok, so, find Professor Snape, if he's not around, find Professor Sinistra."

"Yes. And make sure you don't get caught."

"Well, duh." Tracey rolled her eyes. "That was such an obvious thing to say it wasn't even worth saying."

XoX

Harry watched his friend disappear, either under the disillusionment charm or his invisibility cloak, before turning to the trap door and the giant dog still dozing off thanks to the playing harp. He was honestly surprised it hadn't woken up from all the talking that had been going on around it.

Without any further contemplation, Harry set to work, casting a spell over the harp so it would continue playing after the original spell wore off. Afterword, he walked over to the trap door. It was already open, yet he could see nothing inside. It was pitch black.

A small application of magic and intent had the tip of his wand lighting up like a flashlight. He knelt down and pointed his wand into the trap door, lighting up the room below.

The first thing Harry noticed about the room below the trapdoor was that it looked alive. It took him a second to realize that he was not seeing the floor, but a large plant with writhing tentacle-like appendages.

"That looks like Devil's Snare," Susan said as she, too, got a good look at the plant beneath them.

"It is indeed," Harry said, "It must be Professor Sprout's part of the protections around the stone."

"So what do we do?" asked Daphne as she knelt down next to Harry.

"Devil's Snare has one major weakness," Harry told the blond pureblood as the light from his wand extinguished. He began building up the necessary magic to create flames strong enough to burn the giant plant covering the floor below them. "Fire."

Pointing his wand into the hole, Harry launched a large jet of flame from its tip. Almost acting like a *lumos* that had way too much magic pumped into it, the inferno illuminated the room beneath them in its fiery orange light, right before it struck the plant with the rage of a firestorm.

The Devil's Snare released a shrill cry that sounded almost like the death throws of some kind of animal being hung by a pair of meat hooks while still alive. It was sharp and loud and quite possibly the most horrendous noise Harry had ever heard. He wished he could cover up his ears like Blaise, Daphne, Terry and Susan were doing, but since he needed to keep up the pressure, was not afforded such a luxury.

Eventually, the shrill cries stopped, and Harry cut the power to his *incendio*, then cast another *lumos*. A quick glance revealed that the Devil's Snare was gone, disintegrated until there was naught but ashes and dust.

Satisfied, Harry once more cut the power to his spell, then turned to his friends.

"Alright, the floor to the room beneath us is about fifteen feet down, I'd wager, so here's how we're going to do this. I'm going to levitate each one of you and send you down the trap door, then follow you down myself. After that, we'll begin making our way through whatever enchantments lie in wait for us."

"Are you sure that's a wise idea?" asked Daphne. When Harry raised an eyebrow and waited for her to elaborate, she said, "how are you going to get down if none of us are up here to levitate you? The *wingardium leviosa* requires line of sight to use, and we won't be able to see you from down there."

"Don't worry about that," Harry told her. "I've got a few tricks up my sleeve."

With nothing left to be said, Harry began the process of levitating each of his friends, slowly lowering them through the trapdoor. To make things easier, the first one down, Daphne, cast *lumos* and let him know when she reached the bottom, then continued directing him by keeping her spell up as the others were floated down as well.

With everyone else having gone through the trap door, Harry jumped down without hesitation. He fell to the floor quickly. Magic traveled through his body and to his legs. When his feet hit the floor, Harry bent his knees and dove into a roll, absorbing the worst of the impact. It still jarred him a bit, and he could feel the stress on his joints and bones from having fallen fifteen feet, but nothing had been broken.

Bringing himself back up, he looked at all of his friends and, noticing the way they had dropped their jaw in surprise, was tempted to give them a cheeky smile.

Had the situation not been so serious, he very well might have.

"Let's get going. Remember, keep your wands out and ready," he told them, kicking starting his friends into gear as he walked across the floor and toward the hall on the other side. It was a very narrow hall, and Harry and his friends were forced to walk in a row; Susan next to Harry, while Daphne and Terry came next, and Blaise took up the rear.

At the end of the hall was a very plain wooden door, which Harry did not hesitate to open. He walked through quickly, wand at the ready.

The next room was large and cylindrical in shape. The stone floor, walls and ceiling was illuminated by the red light of torches attached to the walls and spaced at five foot intervals around the room.

While the room itself seemed very plain, there were several things that got their attention. Two things really. Two very big things.

Standing on either side of the door they had just entered, like silent sentinels, were two large marble statues. They reminded Harry of the many depictions he'd seen of medieval knights. With thick pauldron armor and grieves, a chest plate with the carvings of a phoenix on them, gauntlets and heavy-looking helmets, standing proud, their backs erect and their swords stabbed into the stone floor, hands resting on the pommel, they were the very definition of intimidating.

That they were at least three times taller than the first years didn't help much.

On the other side of the room was, what at first glance, appeared to be a door, but on second glance proved to be an archway etched into the wall itself. The archway was outlined by glowing silver lines. Along the curve of the arch were a series of words, and in the center was what looked like millions of tiny dots from a distance.

The group walked into the room. Once Blaise passed the threshold, the door behind them slammed closed and locked. Everyone except Harry turned around, eyes widening as Blaise tried to open the door to no avail.

"It's locked," he mumbled, turning to Harry with a look of mild alarm. It was probably the first time he had truly seen Blaise show genuine emotion.

Daphne walked over to her friend, wand out as she cast *Alohamora* on the door to no effect. Grimacing, she turned to Harry and the others.

"It won't open with magic either."

"Then the only way to go is forward," Harry determined, walking toward the archway. "Come on, let's not dally."

Everyone quickly decided that following Harry's advice was the best option at the moment. As they neared the archway, Terry finally noticed what the thousands of little dots in the center represented.

"That's a star chart," he exclaimed, getting excited about something that only he ever got excited about. Star gazing was a hobby of his. He even had a high powered muggle telescope at his house and a few books on the milky way galaxy. "Look, there's Andromeda and Cygnus. And those are the star constellations Pisces, Aries, and Perseus. It looks like every constellation is on here."

"We probably have to do something with these constellations to get the door open then," Susan spoke softly, a tiny frown of concentration marring her face. "I think the riddle at the top will tell us how to open the door."

"From North to West, and South to East, Illuminate the path of Western Myth."

Everyone read the riddle, their faces a puzzle of perplexity as they tried to determine what they were supposed to do from it.

Everyone except Harry.

"Fortunately, this ones not very hard," Harry said, making the others look at him. "It's talking about Greek Mythology, or the constellations named after Greek heroes and gods. See here?" He began pointing out stars on the chart. "That's Andromeda, daughter of Cassiopeia and Cepheus. And that's Perseus. And those are the star constellations Puppis, Carina, and Vela, which make up the Argo. Obviously, we need to connect the stars to form the constellations. From North to West, and South to East. We need to start with the North constellations and make our way around to the West, then South, then East."

"That makes sense." Terry rubbed his chin in thought. "Right now the constellations we see at night are the northern ones. I wonder if this riddle would change if we were looking at a different set of constellations

right now?"

"I don't really think that matters at the moment," Daphne said dryly.

"Terry," Harry said. "I think I'll leave the honors to you. Be quick though, there's no telling what might happen if we take too long."

"Right."

Terry walked up to the archway, wand out. He began to trace a path with his wand along one of the many constellations shown in the Northern Quadrant of the star chart, Cepheus, Harry recognized.

"Wands out you three," Harry called to the others as he spun around. "We have company."

"Company?" Blaise frowned, also turning around.

Then his eyes widened in fear.

"Oh..."

His fear was understandable as the once still statues had come to life. The two marble knights held their large claymores in a two handed grip as they stalked forward, the sound of their heavy footfalls creating harsh bangs against the stone floor.

"I said wands out!" Harry snapped when he saw none of his friends doing anything but staring at the now living statues with eyes that looked like ping pong balls.

His words snapped the three out of their stupor. Their wands came out and pointed at the walking knights, though they were shaking badly.

"Aim at the one on the left," Harry ordered, following his own directives by swiveling his wand toward the target he had just designated. "We need to concentrate all of our fire power on one of them until it's destroyed, then focus on the other one!"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his friends doing as told. He focused

back on the statues and was very glad they moved so slowly.

"Ready!?"

The tip of Harry's wand glowed blue as he built up his magic.

"Fire!"

"*Reducto!*"

"*Reducto!*"

"*Bombarda!*"

Blaise and Susan both fired a *Reducto* at the left most statue while Daphne launched a *Bombarda*. Harry launched his own overpowered *Reducto*, taking care to actually aim instead of firing blindly.

The four spells sped towards their target, but only two hit. Daphne's blasting hex caught the knight in the left foot, causing the entire foot to explode in a blast of fire and marble. It teetered forward, its balance lost.

Before it could fall, Harry's overpowered Reductor Curse caught the giant statue in the head. There was a terrific explosion of magic where the spell impacted. A blinding flash of light followed by a loud explosion. The helmeted head of the giant knight almost appeared to have disintegrated. Millions of tiny marble dust fragments extended outward from where Harry's spell impacted, showering the ground in granules so fine they almost looked like sand.

The marble knight finished its fall, the sword falling out of its hand as it crashed into the ground with a thunderous '*bang!*'

"Focus on the second knight!" Harry ordered before anyone could even think to gape at the spectacle. "Fire at will!"

More flashes of light followed his orders as everyone turned to the second knight, which had closed at least half of the distance between them in the time it took for the group to 'kill' the first knight. With the first knight destroyed, Blaise and Susan seemed to gain more confidence.

The spells they launched at the moving marble statue hit, taking out chunks from the things torso and in one case blasting the right arm off at the elbow.

Daphne's *Reducto* hit the statues neck this time, destroying it and causing the head to get blasted off. The helmeted head smacked into the ground, cracking and sending chunks of white marble flying as it rolled several times, before stopping at the wall near the door the knight's once stood beside.

Despite taking off its head, the knight did not seem to be stopping. Harry put an end to that when his carefully aimed curse took off the right leg, sending it to the ground where it lay still.

Sighs of relief were breathed all around, as the for who had fought against the knights let the adrenaline begin fading from their bodies.

"Good job you guys," Harry said, feeling the need to congratulate his friends. "I was actually a little worried there for a second."

"We really didn't do too bad, did we?" asked Daphne, a small smile lighting her face. "I mean, we actually managed to beat those things."

"They were kind of slow though," Blaise added, scratching the bottom of his chin. "I'm not sure how we would have fared if they could move faster."

"I hadn't thought of that," Daphne admitted softly, frowning a bit. She shook her head and decided not let Blaise's words get her down. "At least we managed to defeat them."

"I... I wouldn't be too sure of that?" Susan muttered fearfully.

"What?" Blaise looked over at Susan in confusion, only to see her staring at where the statues were lying. Or where they were supposed to be lying.

"She means their getting up," Harry grit out angrily as he aimed his wand.

"What?!"

Blaise and Daphne turned in shock as they saw what Harry and Susan saw. The statues, which had once been on the ground in pieces, were getting back up. What's more, the missing pieces were regenerating right before their very eyes, the marble that made them turning almost liquid as it reformed what had once been lost.

"Shite!" Blaise swore as Daphne readied her wand again, though it was much less steady than it had been during their first engagement.

"Terry!" Harry shouted as he began running through his occlumency lessons to keep calm. "I don't want to rush you, but you're going to want to hurry up!"

"Don't worry!" Terry reassured him, his voice shaking, either fear or the strain of his task, Harry didn't know. Probably both. "I'm almost done. Just give me a few more seconds! A minute at most!"

"I'm not sure we have a minute," Blaise mumbled despairingly.

"Wands at the ready!" Harry shouted. "Fire when ready!"

Harry quickly sent his own blasting hex at the right knight again, which was the closest one. The bright orange light from his *Bombarda* met the knight's torso, blowing up in a brilliant explosion that tore at least half the barrel-like chest apart. The light from his spell was added to when the others began casting magic.

Unfortunately, only his spell hit this time.

"Keep calm!" Harry shouted as he fired again, a *Reducto* this time. His spell took out the sword the knight wielded, as well as its hands.

Again, his spell was the only one that hit.

Harry would have sworn loudly if he wasn't so busy. He knew this was a bad idea. His friends should have never gotten involved in something like this. Now he was the only one keeping calm, and that was just barely, while his friends were beginning to let fear overrule their ability to aim properly.

Gritting his teeth hard enough that his gums began to bleed, Harry continued casting spells. *Bombardas* and *Reductos* flew from his wand, bashing against the titans ambled toward them with slow, ponderous movements.

No longer did he have time to truly aim anymore. He simply let them fly, his body running on instinct. It was only his keen eyes and steady hand that allowed him to continuously hit the statues.

A *Reducto* blasted apart a kneecap, sending the left knight to the ground. One of his *Bombardas* blew apart a shoulder, taking the arm with it. Again and again Harry sent spells after the slowly stalking knights, and again and again they reformed, got back up, and continued moving forward at a slow, inexorable pace, as if taunting him with his inability to kill them.

The closer they got the less accurate the spells from Blaise, Daphne and Susan became. It seemed the three had lost their nerve, and a quick glance confirmed that. They were beginning to lose hope. It was written all over their faces.

Harry snarled as he tried to think of a way out of this situation, tried to think of anything that would get himself and his friends out of this alive.

Unfortunately, there was nothing. The knights were between them and the door, a door which was sealed shut and not even magic could unlock. The only way out of this was forward, and the only way forward was if Terry managed to open the archway.

Harry didn't know what to do, but knowing that failure meant the death of his friends, he refused to give up. Even if he was the only one still hitting anything, he would continue until he was dead.

"I got it!"

Sweeter words had never been heard. The marble knights were about fifteen feet from their position when Terry lined up the last constellation. When the last constellation was lit, the outlined door began to glow with a bright, blue light.

A crack appeared within the center of the archway. There was a loud creaking sound as the doors moved inward of their own volition. Terry ran in, and was soon followed by Blaise, Daphne, and Susan, who couldn't seem to get away from the knights fast enough.

Harry was the last one in, firing spells at the knights as he ran. As he reached the threshold, he made a cutting motion with his wand.

The doors let out a strained groan before, with a scraping sound followed by a loud '*bang!*', shut, keeping the knights from following them.

Harry looked at his four friends to see the state they were in. Blaise and Daphne looked tired and very shaken. They were showing more emotion than they usually did, and it wasn't the good kind. But while they were shaken, it was Susan who Harry worried about. The girl looked close to hyperventilating. Her labored breathing came out in quicker and quicker pants, and her wide eyes stared at nothing. Out of all his friends, Terry was the least affected, but that was just because he hadn't faced down two unkillable statues.

"Susan?" Harry touched the redhead's shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Susan shook her head, tears pricking at her eyes.

"We almost died," she whispered, her voice haggard from their harrowing experience.

Harry sighed.

"This is why I didn't want any of you doing this," he admitted. "Going after the Philosopher's Stone is reckless and foolhardy. These protections were made with the purpose of defeating someone who managed to break into Gringotts and escape without the goblins being the wiser."

No one spoke. They were beginning to realize why Harry had been so adamant on not letting them go after the stone.

"Maybe it would be better if you guys stayed here while I go on ahead," Harry suggested.

"NO!"

Susan's shout startled everyone; even Daphne and Harry, the two with the most composure of the group, couldn't keep their eyes from widening at the redhead's shout.

"I... I'm not going to let you do this alone," Susan said, looking frightened yet determined. "I... we've already come this far with you, so we should keep going... together."

Harry closed his eyes and thought about how he should reply to Susan's words. There were many things he could say to her, including ordering her and the others not to follow him. He wasn't sure they would listen, even though they told him they would. What a troublesome predicament.

The thudding of footsteps approaching interrupt his thoughts. A hand touched his arm just as he opened his eyes, and he was soon staring into the no longer ice blues of Daphne Greengrass.

"You got into this mess because of us, because we decided to go after the stone despite your warnings," Daphne said seriously. "Let us accompany you to make up for our mistake."

Harry frowned as he looked into Daphne's eyes, searching. He wasn't quite sure what he was looking for, but he could already tell that, whatever it was, he wasn't going to find it. Harry was beginning to realize that for all his knowledge on the human psyche and his ability to read emotions, he had no real skill in actually determining what those emotions meant.

Peeling his gaze away from Daphne, he looked at the other three. Susan had stopped shaking and looked a bit better than a few seconds ago. It was a testament to her character and inner strength. She would have made a good Gryffindor, he decided.

Terry was definitely still nervous. He had not been in the fight, but Harry did not discount that he had probably seen what had happened. That he completed his task in spite of it was a credit to his ability at remaining calm while under pressure. Still, in spite of the obvious signs of someone who was scared, he did not look ready to back down.

Blaise had recovered the best among the three. He was still not his normally unflappable self. Harry could see the small twitching of the ring finger of his left hand, a sign of nerves, and the way he shifted his feet ever so slightly. But aside from those small tells, he looked perfectly calm.

"Do you all of you feel this way?" asked Harry. "You guys do understand that the enchantments we just faced are not the only form of protection surrounding the stone. Things are very likely going to get much harder from here on out."

He received a nod from Susan and Terry; Blaise gave what looked like a confident smirk, though Harry thought he saw a hint of uncertainty.

"We've already come this far. Might as well go all the way," the Italian boy said.

Harry closed his eyes. If they could not be dissuaded, he would not stop them. He would just have to make sure they didn't get themselves killed.

"Alright then," he said, turning around and beginning to walk down the long corridor. "Let's go."

The sound of footsteps echoed against the stone walls as Blaise, Daphne, Susan and Terry followed Harry into the next dangerous task, whatever that may be.

XoX

"Which way do we go?" asked Terry as he stood a foot behind Harry. After walking down the corridor, they had been forced to come to a stop as they found themselves standing in a T-junction. Two paths had presented themselves. One to the left, and one to the right. "Should we split up?"

"No," Harry answered almost immediately as he pulled out his wand. "There's no telling what kind of traps are down here. What we do know is that these traps were made with an adult wizard in mind, and are far beyond anything a first year should be capable of getting past."

Harry held his right hand up, palm facing the ceiling as he lay his wand in it.

"However, if we work together, we may actually stand a chance of making it out of here alive."

"But how do we decide which way we should go?" asked Susan, turning her head to look down one corridor, then the other.

"Like this," Harry said, channeling magic through his wand, "Point me."

Harry's wand lifted itself into the air, levitating about an inch off his hand. It then began to quiver for several seconds, before pointing down the left passage.

"This way," Harry told them, keeping a firm grip on his wand and moving down the left passageway. The others followed, each one bringing out their own wands.

It was a lot darker than the room had been. The torches lighting the passageway were spaced ten feet apart instead of five, creating harsher shadows along the walls and floor. After several minutes of walking, Blaise Zabini froze when he stepped on a small tile.

The tile was pressed down with a '*click*' that resounded loudly through the passage. Everyone stared at Blaise with epically-sized, ghastly eyes.

"Get down!" Harry shouted. The four reacted swiftly, almost literally throwing themselves to the ground as Harry ran into the center of their formation and spun his wand around in a complicated pattern. "*Protego Totalum!*"

As the incantation was spoken, a large shield sprung up around them like some kind of dome. The shield was golden in color and so thick it looked almost solid. Only the many garlands of arcane energy that skittered across its surface told them otherwise.

At the same time the shield sprang up, flames burst out from the walls and ceiling. The white hot torrents of fire smashed against the shield with a loud roar. The golden shield was quickly encompassed by a blazing

inferno.

The shields held, but barely. The magic that formed it crackled loudly as it tried to fight off the powerful flames. Several times the shield wavered as a sweating Harry strained to keep it up.

The shields would not last. This much Harry knew. He needed to come up with a plan.

"When I say go, I want you guys to run down the passageway," Harry's strained voice made itself known over the roaring conflagration and the crackling of his shield. "Got it?"

No one argued with him. Or more like, they couldn't argue.

"Alright." Harry closed his eyes; they were useless amount of sweat stinging them anyway, and began opening the gates that contained his magic a bit wider.

With a flick of his wand, the shield flared into an incandescent brilliance that was nearly blinding. Another flick and the golden dome encompassing them began to expand, forcing the flames back until it looked like they were being pushed into the walls.

"GO!"

A small portion of the shield opened up, and Harry's friends ran out. Harry waited for a moment longer before flicking his wand. The shield collapsed, and he pushed himself into a forward shoulder roll just as the flames descended upon the spot they'd been standing on with a vengeance.

The fires barely missed Harry, who kipped back up to his feet. He did not pause or break stride as he went from roll to run, easily catching up with his friends.

They continued running, the fires that nearly burnt them to a crisp following behind them like a pack of rabid wolves. It seemed to have a mind of its own, and its mind apparently wanted to turn them into an extra crispy meal.

"There's a door up ahead!" Terry shouted as they kept running, their breathing sounding ragged and harsh in their ears.

"Keep running!" Harry ordered as he flicked his wand at the door.
"*Bombarda!*"

The door exploded into a million fragments as Harry's spell struck it. The five burst through, making it just as a gout of flame smashed against the open entrance and nipped at their backs. Harry's quick wand work summoned another *Protego*, this one of the more regular variety, and managed to protect everyone from getting their backsides lit on fire.

When the flames died away, Harry turned to see his friends staring at the room they now occupied. Massive didn't begin accurately describing how large the room was. Harry judged it to be easily the size of the Great Hall if not larger. It must have been magically expanded, because there was no way something this large could have possibly existed underneath a trap door on the third floor corridor otherwise.

It was very dark inside of the room; only a few torches illuminated it, and they were not only sparse, but also seemed to stop entirely after reaching a certain point, leaving the rest of the room in darkness.

Harry held up his wand, the tip flaring into incandescence as he cast a silent *Lumos*. The light caused the darkness to withdraw, not only giving them all a better glimpse of the room itself, but allowing everyone to see the large chasm separating them from the other side.

Blaise whistled as he stepped near the ledge and peered down. Either it was very dark or it was incredibly deep, because he could not see the bottom.

"That's some drop." He looked back up and gazed across the room, where he could just barely make out the door on the other end. "And it doesn't look like there's any way to cross."

"There's always a way," Harry said as he stepped forward, eyes surveying the room. "Whoever is after the stone obviously crossed this pit, so we must do the same."

"But how?" asked Daphne. a small frown marring her face and her nose scrunching as she no doubt tried thinking of a way to cross.

"What about that lever?" Susan suggested, pointing over to a small lever that she managed to spot with her keen eyes.

"But that's all the way on the other side of the pit," Terry argued. "How are we supposed to get close enough to flip it?"

"By being creative," Harry said as he pulled out a small rock from within his robes. While his friends looked at him strangely, wondering how he planed on lowing the lever with a rock, Harry waved his wand over it.

The rock began shift. Flowing like water it expanded and moved and twisted as it began to grow and morph, changing from a simple rock into something else. Clawed talons appeared on a set of thin legs that shot out from a small body. A large pair of wings sprouted from either side, and a sharp beak formed itself around a streamlined head. When the transfiguration finished, the rock was no longer a rock, but a bird. A hawk, to be precise.

Its orders already implanted within its mind, the hawk flew over the chasm and toward the lever. All the while Harry's friends gawked at him.

"Wow," Terry mumbled. "You really are good at Transfiguration."

"It's my strongest magic right now," Harry admitted with a shrug.

"Though, to be honest, that wasn't a very complex Transformation. Susan could have done it easily."

Susan flushed at the compliment.

"I don't think I could have done as good a job as you did," she said quietly.

"Sue," Harry admonished with a slight look of reproach, "never sell yourself short. Confidence is the key to all magic. If you don't think you can pull it off, then no matter how hard you try or how perfect your wand movements are, you won't be able to pull it off."

The slight flush of Susan's cheeks remained, but she nodded nonetheless.

A few seconds later the hawk reached the other side and sat down on the lever.

There was a moment where nothing happened, then the lever began moving down with a slight creak of rusted gears, as if it had not been oiled in some time.

A rumbling filled the room. Harry and his friends looked around to see where the rumbling came from, and soon found the source above them. A sliver of the ceiling, which had been invisible due to how high up it was, descended. It lowered until it was level with the floor, then stopped, creating a bridge that spanned the entire chasm.

"Would you look at that," Blaise muttered to himself while the others just stared. The only one not staring was Harry, who was already moving across the bridge.

"Come on," he said, not waiting for the others as he walked forward. "We need to continue moving."

The four friends looked at each other, before walking forward at a quickened pace so they could catch up with Harry.

"Is it just me, or is Harry in a hurry?" asked Terry.

Daphne rolled her eyes and responded with so much sarcasm it couldn't really be called sarcasm. "It's just you. I mean, it's not like we're following some mad wizard who's intent on getting his hands on one of the most powerful magical artifacts ever created. Really, I can't see why you could possibly think Harry might be in a hurry."

Terry and Susan both flinched. Blaise, on the other hand, managed to sum up their thoughts rather nicely.

"Ouch."

XoX

"Well," Harry began slowly as he surveyed the scene before them. "At least their already dead so we don't have to deal with them."

After getting out of the chasm, the group continued making their way past the many defenses protectung the stone. It hadn't taken much time, maybe five more minutes. It seemed they had already run the gauntlet for most of the protections, and the only ones left had been in the next room after moving through another corridor.

Trolls. Two large mountain trolls several heads taller than the one Harry killed during Halloween. They were most likely a last line of defense, as trolls were very hard to handle and weren't smart enough to perform simple tasks like guarding a door.

They were also very dead. One of them looked like its eyes had been gouged out by a piercing curse that penetrated its skull. The other was headless, its head laying 25-feet away from its body.

Both were laying underneath large puddles of crimson blood.

Harry looked over at his friends, all of whom were green in the face. Blaise and Daphne looked especially bad. Susan and Terry seemed to be coping better, likely because they already had experienced a situation even worse than this one.

Not much can beat watching a head explode in the gore department.

"This is... this is disgusting," Daphne said, looking like she wanted to do nothing more than throw up all over the floor.

"It is," Terry agreed, "But this is nothing compared to that troll we ran into on Halloween. Harry made its head explode."

While Blaise and Daphne snapped their heads towards him so fast Harry feared they might get whiplash, the raven-haired youth merely sighed.

"Can we please not bring that up?" asked Harry, moving his gaze away from the troll to the large doorway that led to the next room. The doorway they couldn't get to because of the white flames blazing away between them and it. Nothing else was in the room: just the flames, the doorway,

the dead trolls, and them.

"So, how are we supposed to get past that?" asked Blaise, looking at the fire as well.

"You don't," Harry spoke up as he pointed his wand at himself. His skin began to heat up as it was covered in a thick layer of magic, a sign that the Flame Freezing Charm had taken effect. "I do."

"You're not really planning on going alone, are you?" Daphne frowned at him.

"That is exactly what I am planning," Harry informed her. "I am pretty sure this is the last set of defenses and that the stone is on the other side."

"All the more reason for us to go with you," Daphne said.

"All the more reason for you to stay here," Harry countered. "Whoever is after the stone is obviously on the other side of this fire. And whoever they are, they're obviously talented. None of you have the skills necessary to fight a fully grown wizard."

"And you do?" Daphne raised an eyebrow at him skeptically.

"No," Harry told her, making his friends gaze at him like he'd just admitted the zombie apocalypse was coming. With a roll of his eyes, he said, "don't look so surprised. I'm not arrogant enough to believe I could possibly beat a fully-grown, fully-trained wizard in a fight. However, out of all of us here, I am the only one who has any experience in combat. At the very least, I am confident that I can hold him off until the teachers get here, which should only take about ten, maybe fifteen more minutes."

For a moment there was only silence as two Slytherins, one Hufflepuff, and a Ravenclaw digested Harry's words. It would be Susan who spoke up.

"We would just be a burden to you, wouldn't we?" she asked with a sad smile. "None of us have really helped you the entire time we've been down here, have we? We've only been making it harder for you."

Terry's face fell, and even Blaise and Daphne looked disappointed by Susan's words.

Harry sighed.

"That's not quite true," he corrected her. "Do not forget the third set defenses we came across to get here. I would not have been able to get past those animated knights without you. Without Terry working on the door, and you, Blaise and Daphne helping me fend them off, I would not have made it far enough for the other protections to even matter."

Susan smiled, but it soon left and a worried look crossed her face.

"Are you really going on alone?"

"Yes," Harry said. "As cruel as it sounds, none of you will be able help me. If I am to have any hope of surviving long enough for the teachers to arrive, I will need to be able to fight without holding back. And if I am protecting you guys, I won't be able to do that."

It was a cold, hard truth, and all of them knew it. The only ones with any formal training in dueling were Blaise and Daphne because it was tradition. Susan also had some basic defense training, but it was unlikely to be anything more than basic tactics. None of them had the skill to stand up against a fully-trained wizard, much less one as skilled as whoever could get passed all of these defenses on their own.

Harry looked at his friends, wondering if he should say something to ease their minds. However, the more he tried to think of something to say, the harder it became to think. In the end, he realized there really wasn't anything he could say. Not in a situation like this.

"Wait here until the teachers come," he told them. "It should be safe enough."

He made to leave, turning around so he could walk through the flames, when a hand grabbed the sleeve of his robes.

Turning, he found himself staring into the blue eyes of Daphne Greengrass.

Like always, the young girl's face was mostly expressionless. However, while her face may have been blank, her eyes told another story entirely.

Harry could not begin to guess at what the pretty blond was thinking. Her eyes held so many emotions in them it was impossible to read her with any degree of accuracy. He wondered how the eyes of someone who acted so emotionless could be so expressive.

"Daphne?"

"Be safe," she said softly, letting go of his hand and taking a step back. Harry looked at her for a moment before nodding and turning toward the flames. He didn't say anything, knowing that he could not promise that he would be safe. Not when he would be facing off against someone whose ability in far surpassed his own talents.

As he walked through the flames and towards the entrance that would lead him to the Philosopher's Stone, Harry checked his internal clock to see how much time had passed.

Seven minutes left.

I would first like to apologize for the long delay. The truth is after writing this chapter six times and deleting each and every rendition, I got incredibly frustrated and decided I needed to take a break from this story.

The biggest problem I had was writing what I wanted Harry and his friends to face. In my original, Harry Potter's Rise to Power, I had gone with the canon protections, which lets face it, was the dumbest thing I could have ever done. Not just because they were canon, but because those protections were a complete hoax. A joke. The only reason JK Rowling even managed to get away with such blatantly obvious plot devices is because her story is for children, and they're not going to care that having to catch a flying key on a broom was a task specifically made for Harry Potter (or that a simple acio charm would have summoned the key without needing a broom), or that chess just so happens to be the only thing Ronald Weasley has any talent in (Except for stuffing his face), or that the

entire logic riddle with the potion was merely put there so Rowling could show off Hermione's intelligence (Because let's face it, if you are going to have inextinguishable black flames that you can't get past unless you drink a specific potion that will allow you to walk through them, you aren't going to have said potion in the same bloody room as the flames to begin with). No, they're just going to 'ooh' and 'ah' at all the magical things that are happening.

And now that my rant is over with, I will leave you with these parting words. Thank you all very much for reviewing this story. Those reviews are the biggest reason I'm posting this story online and I can't tell you how much I appreciate them. There is only one chapter left after this (I hope) and I hope you're all looking forward to it.

The Philosopher's Stone

The Philosopher's Stone

After stepping through the door that would lead to the Philosopher's Stone and the one trying to get their hands on it, Harry Potter stopped and took a quick look around.

Torches lined the stone walls and cast enough light that everything within the room was illuminated. Large and cylindrical, spanning about a 50-foot radius and with a height of somewhere around 40-feet, the room reminded him of those ancient spires in old castles... only without the ascending staircase. In the center of the room sat the Mirror of Erised, and standing in front of it, mumbling to himself, his head covered in a large purple turban, was none other than Professor Quirrell.

"Professor Quirrell," Harry said calmly as he walked down the stairs with a measured pace. He absently palmed his wand, ensuring it remained hidden beneath the voluminous sleeves of his robes, the only reason he had worn them and not something that would offer less restricted movement. "I thought I might find you here."

"Potter," Quirrell smiled grimly at the young boy. "I'm not surprised you suspected it was me. Though I am curious to know how you figured it out."

Harry decided to indulge the man. It would give him a moment to prepare himself for the confrontation to come.

"You were too obvious. No one stutters that much when they talk, even if they are frightened to death of their own shadow. There is also the troll to consider. It's not well known, but for those who know how to properly gather information, it's not impossible to discover that you have a special gift when it comes to controlling trolls." Harry cocked his head to the side. "The fact that I always felt a legillemency probe in your classroom those first few weeks of school may have also had something to do with it."

"Such intelligence," Quirrell praised the raven-haired boy in a mocking

fashion. "It's too bad I can't let you go."

Quirrell snapped his fingers and several ropes appeared out of thin air.

"*Diffindo!*"

Harry's wand sprang into action, several cutting curses shooting from the tip and slicing the ropes apart before they could reach them.

He jumped to the left just in time to dodge that same sickly yellow curse he'd run afoul of in the forest. It flew past him and splashed against the stairs, eating through them like they were made of rotting wood.

"Where is Voldemort?" Harry asked, his wand held aloft. Quirrell stood opposite him, his own wand out and ready to send another attack. "I know you're working for him. I know that you're trying to get the Stone so he can regain his body. Where is he!?"

"That's none of your business, Potter," Quirrell sneered as he fired off more curses. Most of them were the same acidic spell Harry was becoming intimately familiar with, but a few were of a kind he had never seen. Though he assumed they were dark curses designed to not only do damage, but inflict pain as well.

Harry dodged most of them, blocking those he couldn't by conjuring small rocks and banishing them into the path of the spells. It was easier to block spells with physical objects instead of a *Protego*, something Harry had determined when coming up with battle strategies.

However, while this strategy kept him from dying, it was only a delaying tactic. So long as Quirrell controlled the flow of battle, Harry would never win. He needed to put the battle in his favor by changing the playing field.

"Very good, Potter. Very good," Quirrell complimented in a taunting voice. "It seems you have improved since the last time we fought."

"The last time we..." Harry only needed a moment to understand what that statement meant. "That was you in the Forbidden Forest?"

"Of course."

"But I thought that was Voldemort!"

Harry was shocked. He could have sworn it was Voldemort who confronted him in the Forbidden Forest. The creature, for he refused to call it a man, that he fought had been more monster than human. Certainly it had not moved like a human. And Quirrel was most definitely a human. Had he been wrong this whole time?

No. He was not wrong. Several times after the battle Harry had snuck into the Forbidden Forest and spoke with Firenze, and the Centaur was positive the thing drinking unicorn blood was Voldemort. Harry trusted the Centaur's judgment on this, as they coincided with his own thoughts and opinions.

Was Quirrell covering up for Voldemort then? Trying to throw him off the trail? Their didn't seem to be much reason to, especially if the man planned on killing him anyway.

And aside from that, there was the fact that unicorn's blood cursed those who drank it. Why would Quirrell drink unicorn's blood when he didn't have to. Unless...

"That wasn't you using legillemency on me in your classroom," Harry's whispered words were surprisingly heard by Quirrell over the spells being fired.

"What was that?"

"Voldemort's here, isn't he?" said Harry, speaking with more volume. "That's why you claimed it was you in the Forbidden Forest. Because he's using your body. And that's why you're wearing that turban. To hide the fact that he is currently residing in your body."

Quirrell's spell casting stopped. His wand was still pointed at the boy that he now eyed warily. The reaction only made Harry more sure of his assumption.

"Such a clever child..."

Harry stiffened as he heard the voice. It was soft, raspy and weak, but

unmistakable. Harry knew that voice. Even if he had not been cursed with eidetic memory, he would never forget the voice of the person who killed his parents.

"Let me speak with the boy... face to face..."

"But Master," Quirrell's voice wavered, "You are not strong enough yet."

"I have strength enough for this."

There was a moment's hesitation before Quirrell began unwrapping the turban. For a moment, Harry thought about using the action to go on the attack. He doubted he would ever get such an advantage like this again, and it would be foolhardy not to take advantage of it.

Yet he did not. Harry's curiosity and desire to face his parent's killer overruled his common sense. He allowed Quirrell to remove the turban unimpeded.

The face was on the back of Quirrell's head. He was pale, his skin a chalky white that made him look like death warmed over. His nose was flat, with only two small slits where his nostrils would normally be. Combine that with his bald head and near lipless mouth made think of a snake.

Yet it was the eyes that held Harry's attention. Those crimson irises that haunted most of his nightmares. The eyes he had seen almost every night for the past ten years within his mind.

"Voldemort," Harry breathed. Despite the man's weakened state, Harry could not keep his heartbeat from speeding up as he gazed upon the visage of the man who took his parents away from him. The man he despised more than anything else.

"Harry Potter," Voldemort's voice carried across to him. The sound of that man's voice, a sibilant hiss more than anything, caused an intense rage to well up within Harry. He wanted to blast this man into oblivion for what he had done. To take revenge on this monster for taking his parents away.

But he didn't. He kept his calm, remembering his Occlumency training. Right now there was no guarantee he would actually be able to kill Voldemort. Not only had he survived getting a killing curse blasted back at him when Harry was but a child, he had Quirrell, who still pointed his wand at Harry, to protect him.

"From the moment I learned you were alive, I knew we would meet face to face once again," Harry stated as he glared at the man. "Though I did not expect to meet you so soon."

"Indeed," Voldemort smirked at him. *"It has been a long time. When we last met, you were but a child. Now you are a young man going to the same school I myself went to when I was your age."*

Voldemort paused, and Harry was sure that, were it not for how he was attached to the back of Quirrell's head, he would have tilted his head.

"I have watched you since you came here, Harry. You have impressed me greatly with your magical knowledge and power. You remind me of myself when I was just starting Hogwarts."

"I am nothing like you," Harry refuted the man's claim fiercely.

Voldemort's smile was mocking.

"Are you not?" he asked. *"Much like myself, you show great talent for magic. Like me you are a model student that everyone looks up to. Like me, you hide behind a veneer of charisma and charming words in order to disguise your true self. We are much more alike than you might think, Harry."*

Harry grit his teeth. Not only because of his words, but because those words were, in many ways, true. Voldemort had done the same thing Harry was doing now. And while Harry justified it by saying he needed to present a strong image so people would follow him when he began changing the wizarding world for the better, Voldemort could have used the same justification for what he'd done.

Did that mean he and Voldemort really were alike?

"You and I are so similar," Voldemort's honeyed words came out sounding like a hissing snake. *"Both talented, both powerful, both ambitious. Yes, I see the ambitions in your eyes, and I can help you make those ambitions a reality. Join me, Harry Potter. Together, we can rule over the wizarding world."*

Harry closed his eyes. His lips pursed as his mind tried to formulate a response. For several seconds, neither he nor Voldemort spoke, one waiting for the young boy to speak, another trying to determine what he should say.

"There are many people like you," Harry's words were soft, yet strong. "People who wish to control everything, who wish to rule the world, who crave power."

Harry's eyes snapped open and set themselves in a hard glare.

"Over the centuries humanity has existed, there are always people like this."

His stance shifted, feet sliding across the floor until they were shoulder width apart.

"And if there is one thing history has shown me about these people it's this."

He placed most of his weight on his hind leg, preparing to move at a moment's notice. He would only have one shot at this.

"People like you do not share power."

Voldemort's face took on an expression of fury as Harry scorned his offer.

"So be it!" He hissed. *"Quirrell! Kill him!"*

Quirrell's wand snapped up and the sickly yellow curse flew from its tip. The spell raced toward Harry at speeds far faster than it had before. It was clear that Quirrell had been holding back during their previous engagement.

No matter. Harry had a plan.

Before Quirrell even moved his wand, Harry was already moving. He pushed himself forward, moving into a shoulder roll. The acidic curse that would have burnt through flesh, muscle, bones and organs, flew overhead, splashing into the wall behind him and eating away at the stone.

Harry finished the roll, kipped to his feet and crouched low to the ground. His wand was already in motion by this time, a quick jab that sent a powerful *Reducto* at the traitorous Hogwarts Professor.

The charm was blocked by a powerful shield, naturally. But that was ok. This was just the opening salvo.

Before the shield even had time to come down, Harry sent another spell. It was basic, just a first year spell, but that hardly mattered. It was not designed to do anything other than distract Quirrell.

The spell did its job. The shield came down and Quirrell swatted it away contemptibly, a sneer on his face.

It was a sneer Harry would soon remove.

"*Bombarda!*"

Harry twirled his wand over his head, then pointed it at his target. As the spell launched from the tip of his wand, Quirrell produced another *Protego*, the shimmering bronze shield that had been protecting him from all the spells Harry sent his way thus far.

Too bad Quirrell wasn't the target.

The spell hit the ground just an inch from the shield. A loud explosion erupted from the point of impact, and both fire and chunks of stone smashed into the shield as a thick layer of dust was kicked up from the ground.

"Gah!"

While the shield around Quirrell held, the man himself stumbled back in surprise, having obviously not expecting an indirect attack. The dust kicked up from the destroyed stone floor also provided Harry with a smokescreen he could use to his advantage.

After his battle in the Forbidden Forest, Harry thought a lot about how he had lost and why, and had determined one thing when it came to his duel. He currently did not have the experience needed to best fully-grown wizards. Even if he mastered every spell he came across, studied every strategy that existed in his dueling books, it would mean little if he lacked the necessary experience to know when to use them.

So Harry came up with an alternative means of fighting until he could improve.

If he couldn't match a wizard using spells, then he would defeat them using fists. It was something he had thought up during his study of the children attending Hogwarts. Aside from Quidditch players, most wizards were very lazy. They did not exercise, they used magic for anything involving physical labor, even the most mundane of tasks.

In other words. They lacked the physical fitness to deal with him up close. While Quirrell could best him in a fight of magic, Harry was positive that he could best the defense professor in a fight of might.

The entire time Harry had been implementing his plan, he never ceased moving toward the Voldemort possessed teacher. By the time the smokescreen dispersed, the raven-haired young man was already inside of Quirrell's defenses.

Quirrell's *Protego* was down and Harry was in the perfect position to demolish him.

Quick as a whip, Harry thrust the palm of his right hand into Quirrell's face. The heel of his palm smashed into Quirrell, hitting him directly in the nose, breaking it.

The satisfaction he felt when he heard the loud crunch of a nose breaking was second to none.

He ignored the sharp pain in his scar when his skin touched Quirrell.

Quirrell stumbled back, grunting in pain as his left hand rose to his now bleeding nose. The grunt soon turned into a scream, however, when the skin of his nose began to peel away as if it had been burned.

Harry ignored this as well and continued to attack. He moved forward one step. Quirrell brought up his wand, cognizant even as he screamed, but Harry quickly grabbed the wrist in an iron grip.

Once more, ignoring his own pain as well as the renewed screams of Quirrell, Harry yanked on the man's arm.

Quirrell stumbled forward, off balance and unprepared for the move, he could do absolutely nothing as Harry took one more step forward and drove his heel into the older man's knee cap.

There was a loud snapping sound as Quirrell's knee cap shattered and his leg bent at an angle the human appendage was not meant to bend. The former defense Professor's screams of pain became screams of agony as his leg shattered and the arm that Harry latched onto began flaking and crumbling like it was made of dust.

With his leg no longer able to support his weight, Quirrell began to fall, and Harry initiated the last phase of his plan to beat the defense professor.

Moving so fast his magically enhanced body was little more than a blur, Harry slid into a wide stance, feet spread wide, legs bent at exactly forty five degrees, and his fists tucked into his torso.

The fists were not there for long. With another move of blistering speed, both fists lashed out towards Quirrell, striking him hard in the chest and stomach with enough force that the traitor was sent flying backwards for nearly five feet.

Quirrell hit the ground hard, landing on his back with a loud crash. Yet that did not seem to register with him. In fact, he seemed too busy covering his face with both hands and screaming himself hoarse to even realize what happened to him.

Harry watched in a mixture of shock, fascination and horror as the man's body seemed to shrivel up. It was almost like all of the moisture was being sucked out of Quirrell's body. His skin took on a pallid, sickly hue as skin and muscles began degrading at a rapid pace. Before long, Quirrell's body became nothing more than a dried up husk, and even that soon became nothing more than dust as the body crumbled into a pile of ashes.

As Harry stared at the remains of what had once been the defense Professor, his stomach rebelled. Falling to his knees, only his hands kept him from falling on his face, as his body forced up whatever was left from the food he had eaten during dinner. Even after throwing up all of his food, his body continued to dry heave for several moments before he could get it under control.

Stumbling to his feet, Harry shook his head and cast a quick spell to clean and freshen his mouth.

He had not expected to react like that. After the troll incident Harry assumed he would have been immune to such violence. It appeared such was not the case.

A part of him wondered if that was because the person he just killed was human, or if there was some other reason for it.

Shaking his head, Harry decided he could think on such thoughts later, after he finished here. There was still work to do.

One minute left.

Harry strode over to the Mirror of Erised, the last defense for the Philosopher's Stone. As he stepped into the mirror's view, an image appeared. It was the image of what Harry desired more than anything else in the world.

In it, Harry was older, a fully-grown adult. His hair looked the same as always, just a little longer, and his body had filled out and looked like an Olympian athlete. There was a confidence in his movements that not even the Harry of right now possessed, and an easy going, content smile on his face that Harry secretly longed to have on his own face.

The reason for this smile stood right beside the older Harry. A woman. He did not know who she was, for her form appeared blurred. Everything from the color of her hair and tone of her skin to the structure of her face was indecipherable. All Harry could make out was the form of a fully grown female adult whose frame the older Harry had an arm wrapped around.

In the females arms was a bundle of blankets, and inside the bundle was a small child with raven-colored hair and vivid green eyes. The only difference between a baby Harry and this baby was that it lacked the scar on his forehead. This was his child.

Family. The one thing Harry desired more than anything else in the world. A desire so deep that Harry would never admit to having it, not even to himself.

Thirty seconds left.

Harry pointed his wand at the mirror, the tip glowing brilliant blue as he channeled a massive amount of energy into it. The runes along the wand began lit up, brighter and brighter until the entire wand was covered in so much light the wand itself could not be seen.

"Reducto."

The words were whispered, yet it did not change the effects. All the magic gathered in the wand launched itself out, blasting into the mirror and hitting it with all the power of a raging dragon.

The mirror was not blasted into pieces, broken into tiny fragments that scattered across the floor. It was just gone. Not even granules the size of sand remained. Harry had used so much power that the mirror had literally been erased from this plain of existence.

Closing his eyes, Harry took a deep breath, then let it out. Glad that this situation had been resolved. Now all that was left to do was wait for the teacher's to arrive and explain what happened.

Or so he thought.

A loud shriek of rage brought Harry back to reality. He spun around, his eyes wide as he tried to find the source of the sound. He found it alright, and when he laid sight on the source, his mouth dropped into an open gape.

Voldemort, now a wraith-like figure, hovered in the air, his form made of dark ectoplasm that was semi-translucent yet thick enough that he almost looked solid. It shrieked at Harry again, causing the young boy to take a step back, not that the act changed anything.

The wraith flew forward, crashing into Harry, moving through him, into him. The shadowy form of Voldemort entered Harry's body, disappearing.

Then the pain hit. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before. Harry thought he knew pain. He'd had his entire body nearly crushed by a troll. The feeling of his rib cage caving in and puncturing his lungs had been agonizing, the way his spine felt like it had snapped made him wish for death. Harry knew pain, but this was suffering beyond anything he had ever felt. It was pain beyond compare.

Every single nerve ending in his body screamed in absolute agony. His body felt like it was being ripped apart from the inside out. Like hot, molten metal was being pumped into his nervous system and melting him from the inside out.

Beyond the pain in his body was the pain in his scar. He could feel it, the darkness inside of him screaming, shrieking as it tried to force its way out of his head. It felt like someone had taken a pair of pliers and used them to pry his skull open, then sent a burst of electricity through his brain in an attempt to fry it.

His body twitched and spasmed, twisting and turning as it tried to instinctively find some way to alleviate the torturous pain unlike anything Harry had experienced before. It was to no avail. Nothing seemed to work, and all Harry could do was hopelessly defend himself against the intruder causing him so much physical and mental anguish.

Harry thought he heard voices, shouts, but he could not be sure. His mind, addled by pain, began going numb. He couldn't even feel his body anymore.

As darkness engulfed him, he thought he saw several figures appearing within his vision. He could not be sure, but he thought the shouting had grown louder.

In spite of what was happening, what had already happened, Harry could only feel relief when he lost consciousness.

XoX

Time passed. Life moved on. Some things changed while others stayed the same. It was the way of the universe, that the passage of time created differentiations to occur within people and places.

It's been three years since I first met Master Wei. Two years since I became friends with Lisa. It feels almost like a lifetime, and I can't help but reflect on the changes in myself; no longer bitter, no longer vengeful. I still disliked my relatives, but I didn't let it rule me. I feel like I've become a different person, a better person. But then, perhaps that is just my perception of things, shaped by the reality that only I can perceive.

"Harry?"

I looked over at Lisa. My friend. My best friend. And a warm feeling encompassed my chest, starting from my heart and expanding outward to engulf the rest of my body. I feel light.

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You're spacing out on me."

I smiled at her. "I'm fine. Just thinking is all."

She stared for another second, then shook her head. "Weirdo."

"Brat."

XoX

The first thing Harry noticed upon returning to consciousness was that he was incredibly sore. It felt like he had done one of his most intense and

rigorous training routines for several days straight without stopping, then had Hogwarts dropped on him for good measure

The second thing he noticed was that he was lying on a soft bed. This was followed by the smell of potions, confirming that he was laid up in the hospital wing.

Finally, the third thing he noticed was the presence sitting in a chair next to him. It was strong, vibrant and full of life, yet at the same time felt old and wise. He couldn't recognize the signature, as he still had trouble sensing magic, but whoever the person sitting next to him was, they were very powerful.

Opening his eyes, Harry blinked several times as his vision adjusted to the change in light. When he was properly adjusted, he turned his head and found himself staring into the blue eyes hidden behind half-moon spectacles of Albus Dumbledore.

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry slurred. He was still extremely tired. Even moving his mouth took more effort than it should.

"Ah, Harry," Dumbledore said, sounding truly surprised to see him up. "How are you feeling?"

There were a number of responses Harry could think of to that, and all of them were sarcastic.

"I'm fine," Harry mumbled, trying, and failing, to push himself into a sitting position.

He was immediately pushed back down by two hands that were much stronger than their frail looks suggested.

"I think it would be best if you not get up quite yet," Dumbledore told him gently. "Your body and mind have suffered a lot of duress from Voldemort trying to take possession of your body."

Harry thought about arguing with the man. He disliked sitting still for any period of time, unless doing something worth while, like reading or studying, but decided not to. He was tired .after all, and it would not do to

push himself after what happened in the chamber where the Mirror of Erised was held.

"How long have I been out?" asked Harry.

"About twelve hours," Dumbledore replied. "I'm actually surprised. Madam Pomfrey suspected you would be incapacitated for much longer."

Harry nodded noncommittally. He had always been a fast healer.

"You said Voldemort tried to possess me?" he asked, bringing up the subject that had him curious. He suspected that was what had happened. It was rather hard to tell when suffering from indescribably excruciating amounts of agony.

"Indeed he did," Dumbledore said, and Harry thought he saw a look of pride on the ancient man's face. "However, it was not a full possession. You managed to fight him off long enough for me to arrive and pull him out before he could truly take possession of you." There was a twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes as he looked at Harry. "You did quite an admirable job of keeping him from possessing you. I dare say he will never try that again."

"So you helped me?" Harry frowned when Dumbledore confirmed his question. "What about the other teachers? I had my friends go and get them for help."

"They arrived a little after I did," Dumbledore explained.

"How did you get to me so quickly?" asked Harry, his brow furrowing even more. "I thought you had gone to the Ministry."

"I did," Dumbledore acknowledged. "I had received a missive earlier from the Minister of Magic, you see. However, when I got there, Minister Fudge told me he had not sent me a missive at all. I knew then that the letter had been a hoax to get me out of the castle..." Dumbledore frowned, a pensive expression crossing his face. "I suspect that Voldemort managed to somehow mimic the magical signature of Minister Fudge somehow."

"That shouldn't be possible, should it?" Harry felt a bit better now, and slowly pushed himself into a sitting position. He was thankful Dumbledore didn't try to stop him this time. "I mean, your magical signature is like your finger print. No two signatures are the same, not even those of identical twins."

The old Headmaster gave Harry a smile. "Very good, Harry. Yes, magical signatures are unique to each person. However, it is possible for one to mimic a signature, though such a task is difficult to accomplish. It requires an innate understanding of magic that few possess. Unfortunately, Voldemort is one of those people."

"I see," Harry grew thoughtful. The idea that someone could mimic another's magical signature was intriguing. It definitely merited a more thorough investigation when he got the chance.

He shook his head.

"So what happened to the Philosopher's Stone?"

"The Stone is gone." Dumbledore rubbed his chin. "It seems that the Mirror of Erised was completely destroyed during the fight between you and Quirrell. The Stone had been hidden in a separate dimension, and the gateway had been the mirror. With the mirror now gone, there is no way to reach the Stone."

"You can create separate dimensions?" asked Harry, perking upright even more when he heard this tidbit of information.

"Well, it's not so much of a dimension as it is a pocket space," Dumbledore mused, eying Harry with amusement as he saw the boy paying rapt attention to him. "What I essentially do is create an extra space separate from the realities of our world and then link it to an object. In this case it was the mirror."

"So it's some kind of reality warping spell," Harry mused. "You're essentially tearing the fabrics of reality to create a small space attached to an inanimate object."

Dumbledore blinked.

"Yes. Yes, that is it exactly."

Harry's eyes sharpened as they fell back on Dumbledore.

"Is it possible to learn this spell?"

For a long moment, Dumbledore stared at the young boy with an expression that was almost gawking. However, after a minute or two, the old Headmaster offered Harry an amused smile.

"It is possible to learn this spell. I could even teach it to you..." Harry grinned a grin that died with the next words Dumbledore spoke. "... eventually. However, that particular spell is very powerful, very advanced. I'm afraid that, at your current level, you would not be able to even begin learning it."

Harry felt like pouting at the much, much older man. The only reason he did not was because he didn't want to look like a child.

Deciding to focus on something other than his disappointment, he asked, "what happened to Voldemort?"

At this, Dumbledore's expression darkened.

"I am afraid that Voldemort managed to escape. Unfortunately, not even I am capable of detaining a soul like his." His expression brightened a second later. "Still, he may have escaped, but you are still alive, and for that, we should be thankful. As strong as you are, had I arrived a minute later, I fear you may have actually died."

Harry frowned at the thought. He did not really fear death, but he had many things he wished to accomplish before his time came. Dying at the age of 11 was not conducive to his goals.

He made a note to avoid death as much as possible in the future.

"Professor," Harry bit his lip nervously when Professor Dumbledore turned an inquiring gaze on him. For a moment, he thought about backing off and forgetting about what he wanted to say, but only for a moment. He needed another opinion on this. "When I confronted

Voldemort, he said that I reminded him of himself." He paused. "Am I... I'm not really like him, am I?"

Dumbledore shifted in his seat to face Harry more fully, his face etched into a grave yet understanding expression.

"It is true that you have many traits that Voldemort prided himself on," Dumbledore admitted, and Harry barely withheld a wince. "You are gifted, intelligent, charming, ambitious, and, if I do say so myself, have a certain disregard for the rules."

The attempt at brevity was lost on Harry, who felt like the world had just been swept out from underneath him.

"However, you are also very different from Voldemort," the Headmaster continued. "Voldemort never let himself befriend anyone. To him, everyone was a pawn to use and abuse. You, on the other hand, have opened up to several people here and have become good friends with them, if I am not mistaken. Tell me, Harry, how important are your friends to you?"

"I would die for them," Harry stated without any hesitation.

"And that is where you and Voldemort are different," Dumbledore said with a smile. "Voldemort never had any friends. He believed they were a weakness. And he would never be willing to risk his life for another. That you would do so tells me you are very different from Voldemort. That unlike him, you possess a heart that is capable of great compassion and understanding. And that makes all the difference."

Harry leaned back against the headboard of the bed, relieved that he was not like Voldemort. Thinking back on it, he felt almost like a fool for letting that man's words get to him. People like Voldemort made a game at playing with the emotions of others. They enjoyed causing people pain, be it mental or physical. That had probably been his purpose. The Dark Lord wanted Harry to suffer because he relished watching others suffer.

"To be honest, you actually remind me more of myself than you do Voldemort," Dumbledore said, causing Harry to perk up.

"Really?"

"Oh yes." Dumbledore smiled happily, clearly reliving pleasant memories. "Back when I was a student at Hogwarts, I was much like yourself. A gifted and intelligent student with a passion for learning, and a bit of a reckless streak. I see much of myself in you."

Harry wasn't quite sure what to say to that. He was actually rather flattered. Say what you will about the man, it didn't change the fact that Dumbledore was a powerful wizard. For him to say that Harry reminded him of himself was akin to saying that Harry had the capability to become just as powerful as him one day.

"Thank you, sir."

Dumbledore offered him a smile.

"You're quite welcome, Harry."

"Are my friends alright?" asked Harry, getting to what he felt was the final order of business. Dumbledore offered him a congenial smile.

"They are perfectly alright, physically, at least. I daresay they are currently fraught with worry for you. Miss's Greengrass and Bones have been particularly inconsolable when last I saw them."

Harry winced as he realized something.

"They saw what happened, didn't they?"

"If, by what happened, you mean they saw Voldemort try to unsuccessfully possess you, then yes, they did."

Harry was afraid of that. It was just another reason they should not have gone after the stone. Aside from the danger, he didn't want to expose them to anything that could cause untoward distress. The mind of a child was a fragile thing; easily broken and difficult to fix.

"However," Dumbledore's voice intruded upon Harry's thoughts. "I believe if they see you, they would feel much better."

"Can you get them?" asked Harry. Dumbledore opened his mouth, about to speak, but before he could, Madam Pomfrey, who had been sitting at her desk, chose that moment to speak up.

"Absolutely not," she gave both the Headmaster and Harry a stern look. "I can't have your friends disrupting your recovery. You need your rest."

Harry frowned. Now that he was finally awake, he'd begun actively channeling his magic to promote physical healing. Even now the aches and pains within his body were disappearing, and while the pain in his scar wasn't going anywhere, all it would take was a few hours of meditation each night to change that.

"But I'm feeling a lot better now," he told her, trying hard not to make it sound like he was whining. He didn't want to seem like a petulant child. "Surely, they could see me for a few minutes at least."

Madam Pomfrey opened her mouth, no doubt to tell him that his friends could not see him if the stern expression on her face was anything to go by, when the Headmaster interrupted her.

"I do not think allowing Harry's friends a few minutes to see him would do any harm." Dumbledore smiled congenially, his eyes twinkling behind his half-moon spectacles. "It may even do them some good. There is nothing like being surrounded by one's friends to help people on the road to recovery."

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips, but in the end, relented and decided to let Harry's friends visit.

"Harry!"

His friends didn't enter one by one, but streamed in by twos and threes as soon as the double doors opened. Madam Pomfrey huffed as she watched several of Harry's friends rush in with abandon. Only Blaise actually walked in with any sense of calm. Even Daphne was nearly running in her haste to reach him.

The first to reach Harry was Susan. The girl looked utterly distraught. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, her nose looked like it had been

rubbed raw by a handkerchief, and the moment she saw him tears began welling up in her eyes again.

Harry was just thankful the girl didn't hug him this time. While magic went a long way toward making him feeling better, it would be a few more hours before his body actually healed.

"Are alright? You're not hurt, are you? Stupid question, of course you're hurt! You're laying in a hospital!" Susan's rapid fire speech had Harry's head spinning. He tried to speak, but couldn't think of anything to say. Not that he actually had the chance. "Oh Harry, it was horrible! We came in with Dumbledore and you were on the floor and screaming and it looked like you were in so much pain and I... and I..."

"Susan! Susan, calm down," Harry said, using the pause Susan took to regain her breath to speak. "Look, I'm fine. See? I'm right here, and I'm perfectly alright, ok?"

Susan nodded her head furiously and used the sleeves of her robe to wipe her wet eyes. She looked so depressed, like someone had just killed her favorite gold fish. It reminded him of Lisa when her gold fish, which he'd won at a school fair when they were nine, died, and Harry had to resist the urge to hug her.

As Harry calmed Susan down, Daphne used the distraction to slip into the seat Dumbledore quietly vacated to give Harry some time alone with his friends.

She very discreetly slipped her hand into Harry's left one, which lay on the bed near her. Harry's eyes glanced down at the hand now holding Daphne's, then at the girl to see her studiously ignoring the fact that she was holding his hand, looking anywhere but at him.

He shrugged his curiosity off. She probably needed some form of physical contact to reassure her that he was alright. He had read a book that some people preferred physical reassurance as opposed to words when seeking comfort. Daphne was probably like that. Given how little physical affection she received from her father, this didn't surprise him.

Gently gripping the soft hand belonging to one blond heiress, Harry

turned his attention to the others. All of them offered their relief at seeing him hearty and hale, except for Hermione, who trembled as she tried to keep from crying. Harry sighed at the bushy haired witch worrying her lower lip between her teeth.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" he asked, already having a hunch about what was bothering.

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered, tears beginning to run out of her eyes and down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry. I never should have suggested going after the Stone. Because of me you've been hurt..."

Harry shifted a bit. Truth be told, he was kind of angry at Hermione, though not for the reasons she assumed. But seeing her like this made him very uncomfortable, which honestly surprised Harry, because he seemed to have gotten more experience at dealing with crying girls ever since coming to Hogwarts. Shouldn't he be used to this by now?

"Do you know why I didn't want any of you going after the Stone now?" he asked, looking Hermione in the eyes. Hermione nodded her head mutely. "And have you learned your lesson?" Another nod. "Are you going to do this again?" Hermione shook her head. "Then all is forgiven." Harry smiled.

Hermione's relief was palpable. Tears ran down her eyes as she rushed over to his side and pulled him into a tight hug.

Harry hissed in pain as Hermione's arms pressed the fabric of his clothing against his overly sensitive skin. His nerve endings lit up once more, sending a stream of fire through his body.

Hermione jerked back when she heard Harry's hiss of pain.

"I'm so sorry," Hermione held a hand to her mouth in shame. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Harry, I'm –"

"It's fine," Harry interrupted as he channeled more magic through his body to counteract the pain. "I'm just a little tender, that's all."

Hermione quickly backed off after that, not wanting to inadvertently cause

Harry anymore duress than she already had.

"So what exactly happened down there?" Lisa asked the question many people there had. Harry was actually surprised Tracey hadn't asked that question, seeing how she had been the most enthusiastic among the group to go after the stone.

A quick glance at Tracey caused him to frown for a second. She had been quiet for the most part, only offering a quick word about how happy she was to see that he was alright, but otherwise remaining silent. Even now she was not acting like her usually talkative self. Instead she stood next to Blaise, her eyes unfocused and her lips pursed.

He would have to speak with her later to see what was bothering. For now though, there were other things to do.

Harry began to run his thumb over the back of Daphne's hand, which was now hidden under the blanket, and began to tell his friends a story about a mirror, a defense professor, and a dark lord attached to the back of said professor's head.

XoX

The ride home at the end of the year was just as lively as the ride home during the Christmas holidays.

Harry Potter and his friends sat in a magically expanded compartment where they talked and laughed, played rounds of exploding snaps, and spoke of what they would be doing over the summer.

"I'll be going to Italy this summer with my mum and sister," Blaise was telling Neville, Hermione and Terry, all of whom sat closest to him. "Most of our family lives in Italy and there's going to be a gathering there. It's sort of mandatory for all members of our family to attend."

"That sounds like a right sight better than what I'll be doing this summer," Neville said a little dryly. Hermione looked at him curiously.

"What are you doing this summer, Neville?"

"I'll probably stay at home," Neville said with a shrug. "Grans not really big on travel, especially international travel. We may have a few members of the family come over, but for the most part, I will probably spend time in my Greenhouse."

"I've never been out of the country before," Terry said with a sigh. "I always wanted to do some traveling, but whenever my parents would go off on one of their excursions, I would be stuck with a nanny."

"What about you, Hermione?" asked Neville. "Any plans for the summer?"

"Well," Hermione tilted her head to the side. "My parents did mention that they were thinking about going to France..."

"You're so lucky," Lisa told Hannah after listening to what the blond girl and her red-haired friend planned on doing over the summer. "I've always wanted to travel to America. While the colonies don't have as rich a history as Europe, there are many ruins from ancient civilizations that are said to have magical origins in North America. I read that the Mayans were gifted with some of the most powerful seers in the history of the world."

"I don't think we'll be going to see any ancient ruins," Hannah said with a small shake of her head. "My dad's just taking us to California. He bought a new wine vineyard there." The blond Hufflepuff smiled. "Personally, I just want to go to the beach."

"Ugh, I'm so jealous of you guys," Lisa groaned. "You two are going to another country, another continent, while I'm going to be stuck at home with my sister."

"If you want, we could ask Hannah's dad if we can take you with us?" Susan, ever the loyal Hufflepuff, suggested. Lisa offered a smile, but shook her head.

"You could try, but I already know what my dad would say." She adopted a stern face and in a deep, mocking version of her dad's voice, said, "The colonies are dangerous. There's no telling what those barbarians might do to you if you wandered off alone."

Hannah and Susan giggled at the stern-looking face Lisa made. It didn't really look all that stern, and was much more comical than anything else—probably because her eyes were crossed as she spoke.

Harry Potter let most of the conversation wash over him. He listened in, but didn't partake all that much, except to say he would probably be spending most of his summer with Lisa Crawft when asked of his plans.

Sitting on his left, Daphne Greengrass had also been very quiet. Nothing new there. The young heiress to the Greengrass fortune was usually quiet, except for when making sarcastic comments at people, Tracey mostly.

And speaking of, Harry glanced over at the brunette Slytherin. Tracey had been abnormally quiet since the incident with the stone. After Harry was let out of the hospital, the girl had not said more than two dozen words, at least in his presence.

"Tracey," Harry called, startling the girl and making her turn to face him. "Are you alright?"

Tracey Davis grimaced, but quickly offered him a smile that did not reach her eyes.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Harry. Thanks for asking."

"Are you sure nothing's bothering you?" asked Harry, prompting the girl to grimace again. "You've been awfully quiet."

"Just thinking," was Tracey's reply.

Harry frowned as he continued to study the young Slytherin. He glanced over at Daphne, who caught his eyes, and tilted his head toward Tracey. The blond girl looked at Tracey, who had gone back to staring out the window. Her eyes traveled back to Harry and she shook her head, before offering a helpless shrug, letting him know that she did not know what was going on either, though not for lack of trying.

Deciding to turn his thoughts to other endeavors, Harry's mind went to what happened after he was released from the hospital wing. Like

always, there had been numerous rumors going around, and Harry was not surprised to discover that most of them were both right and wrong. Some were true, like Harry killing the defense professor being the reason he had been laid up in the hospital, but the real story had been far more fantastical than any rumor.

The only other incident of interest had been the last Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw.

It had been a decently hard fought match. Ravenclaw had come up with a number of plays specifically designed to break up any attempt Harry made at involving himself in Gryffindors plays.

It was most unfortunate for Ravenclaw that Oliver had already come to this conclusion and created an entirely new set of plays, essentially negating the advantage Ravenclaw would have had.

The Quidditch game ended after Harry caught the snitch with a total of score 445 to 290 in Gryffindors favor, winning Gryffindor the House Cup and making both Professor McGonagall and Oliver Wood very happy.

In fact, the winning of the Quidditch Cup had been such a phenomenal occasion that no one even really cared about Gryffindor winning the House Cup as well. Most were just glad Slytherin had not won again.

Hours later the Hogwarts Express arrived at King's Cross. Harry and his friends all disembarked from the steam train and stepped onto the platform.

"Daphne."

The first one to find the group of friends was Nathaniel Greengrass. How the Head of the Noble House of Greengrass managed to find them so quickly was baffling, and Harry suspected the man had placed a permanent tracking charm on his daughter.

Should that be the case, he would need to look into that at some point. If his plans for keeping Daphne from being sold off like chattel did not work, he would need some way to disable the tracking charms.

Tracey leaned over to Blaise and cupped her hand to the dark-skinned boy's ear to whisper, "no matter how many times I meet him, Daphne's dad still scares the crap out of me."

Blaise did not say anything, but nodded his assent all the same.

While many shrunk from the dead eyes of the man before them, Daphne turned to look at Harry.

"Have a pleasant summer, Heir Potter," Daphne said, calling him by his title as the heir to the Ancient and Most Noble House of Potter. She offered her hand to the young heir. Harry took the proffered hand and brushed his lips against her knuckles.

"You as well, Heiress Greengrass." Harry returned her gesture, offering the girl a smile. "I'll write to you." His eyes flickered over to Nathaniel Greengrass, who watched the proceedings with his cold, unfeeling gaze. "Perhaps, should your father permit it, we can even plan a get together with the rest of our friends."

It was probably a good thing Daphne's back was turned to her father, otherwise he would have been displeased by the display of emotions she showed, offering Harry what was quite possibly the warmest smile he had ever seen.

"I would like that," she said softly.

XoX

Harry appeared within his room in a soft whisper. A quick glance showed that nothing had changed since he left a little over nine months ago. It still looked just the same as it always did, with not even a single sheet of paper out of place.

Setting his trunk down next to his bed, Harry was quick to open up the fourth compartment. A wave of his hand had a small object levitating out of the open trunk and onto his palm. It was a little larger than his fist, and looked kind of like a lump of coal wrapped in gray cloth.

Unwrapping the fabric surrounding the object, Harry revealed the item in

his hand to be a shining, blood red stone that glowed and hummed with arcane energies. The Philosopher's Stone.

Harry smiled at the object he had taken out from under everyone's nose. He felt a sense of pride at having managed to take such a valuable magical object from underneath Dumbledore's watch, and managed to fool both the Headmaster and Voldemort into thinking the stone had been permanently lost.

His plans on getting the stone and making it look like the stone had been destroyed during his confrontation with Quirrell had not gone as planned. He had not expected Hermione to discover what was hidden underneath the third floor corridor, which had made his carefully devised strategies to reach the stone null and void, forcing him to improvise, but everything had worked out in the end.

In many ways he had to thank Hermione Granger for being so stubborn in her desire to go after the Stone. While not been pleased that his friends had been placed in danger, her actions had led him to learning a valuable lesson.

There was an old saying made by Field Marshal Helmuth Carl Bernard Graf von Moltke. It went *'The tactical result of an engagement forms the base for new strategic decisions because victory or defeat in a battle changes the situation to such a degree that no human acumen is able to see beyond the first battle. Therefore no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.'*

Harry had forgotten this very basic fact, which could be applied to life just as easily as it could be applied to battle. Every second one lived there were an infinite number of variables that could change the outcome one might expect. It was impossible to plan for every single outcome, so Harry would need to keep any future plans flexible enough that they could be adapted to any given situation on the fly.

Staring at the priceless artifact, Harry began making plans to study it. He would need a number of things, not the least of which was a list of spells used to scan magical artifacts to determine how they worked. He had copied several books from the Hogwarts restricted section that talked

about Alchemy. Perhaps he would find something in there. If not, it would be back to square one.

After he finished studying the Philosopher's Stone to his hearts content, he would send a letter to Nicholas Flamel, informing the alchemist that he had the Stone. While the opportunity to study such a powerful object was too good for him to pass up, Harry was no thief. He would return the Stone to its rightful owner... eventually.

Naturally, that would be after he learned everything he could. After all, not many people can say they had the Philosopher's Stone in their grasp.

This is the end of this story. And this is the first story I finished. I find it most ironic that the last story I made was the first one I finished, but the muse works in strange and mysterious ways.

Now, before anyone freaks out I will tell you that YES! THERE WILL BE A SEQUEL! This is for all those people who apparently didn't read my A/N at the end of chapter 18. There will be a sequel, which will show Harry's second year. There will be another that will be about his third year, and another about his fourth and so on until I'm finished. The only thing I am unsure about is whether I am going to finish this series of stories by Harry's sixth year or his seventh. But rest assured, I will be writing sequels to this story.

And finally, I would like to thank everyone who reviewed my story. Your contribution to my reviews whether they be criticisms and critiques to encouragements have been invaluable in giving me the motivation to continue this story and see it through to the end. So for that, I thank you.

In any case, this story is now finished. I hope you all enjoyed it. If you did, let me know. Appreciation is always a welcome motivator to get started on the sequel faster. If you didn't. Let me know what you don't like so I can ensure that I do not make the same mistakes in the future.

Special Announcement

Special Announcement!

Before I make my announcement, I would like to take this time to thank everyone who reviewed my story, especially my last chapter. I don't know how many did as there doesn't seem to be a way to see the review count for individual chapters, but I know that there were a lot. At least over 150 reviews. Thank you all very much. It pleases me to know that you enjoyed my story enough to let me know.

And for those of you who enjoyed my story, I would like to also announce that the first chapter for the second book of my Harry Potter series is now up! Please take a look at it and be sure to let me know what you all think.

Thank you very much once again.